

THE GILT-EDGED BOY

TO STRESSES AND STRAINS
him a fortune in shares of the family's world-famous prophylactic firm, Trundels, his troubles begin. Great-Aunt Bessie was a most puritanical lady, and strongly disapproved of the permissive society. So there is a proviso to her will. If Jason is to inherit he must remain chaste until marriage, and then espouse a suitably virginal girl. To a young man of liberal views this is a shock. The stresses and strains occasioned by the frustration of his amorous ambitions result in a sophisticated literary romp that is even funnier than the author's bestselling *Percy*.

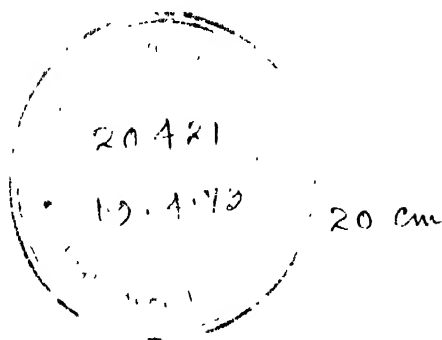
Also by Raymond Hitchcock

PERCY

THERE'S A GIRL IN MY SOUP

THE GILT-EDGED BOY

Raymond Hitchcock



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To
Maurice – a little late

In nature there are neither
rewards nor punishments—
there are consequences.

Robert Green[™]Ingersoll

One

‘YOUR LATE great-aunt was an extraordinary woman . . .
. . . difficult . . . almost a paranoiac . . . but original.’

Mr Sydney Lom, of Freeman, Lom and O'Donahue, Solicitors, of Lincoln's Inn, releases a faint smile but instantly recants, spreads his fingers wide under his chin and presses his elbows even more firmly into the black leather top of his desk :

‘And she has left me this very delicate and onerous task.’

Jason Reeve sits back in the spacious, heavily buttoned green velvet chair, crosses his fine young legs in their slightly flared trousers and waits. Mr Lom looks straight ahead to the coat rack, then back to his unblemished blotter; throws down a switch; orders two cups of coffee, then stares at the ceiling :

‘You know, of course, where your money comes from . . . of the family fortune?’

Jason nods. You cannot see the family products in every men's hairdresser's and shop in the Charing Cross Road and remain in ignorance for long. Nor survive all those years at school as ‘Frenchie’.

‘Trundel International, a household name and a perfectly normal business, properly run, well managed, with a good profit/earnings ratio and performing an important, indeed many would say a vital, role in keeping world population levels within bounds. It is also an old-established firm . . . gold medals from the 1888 Exhibition, the Leipzig Fair and Expo 1970 . . . royal appointments from all over the world, and a steady growth rate. But, unfortunately, your late great-aunt, Miss Bessie Trundel-Jones, did not see it that way.’

Jason is surprised : 'No?'

'No. You must remember that Miss Bessie's attitudes were those of the mid-nineteenth century. To put it bluntly, she disapproved of everything Trundel's stood for, and all they made. In fact, so violent was her disapproval that throughout the seventy years she held the stock *she never took a single dividend!*'

'God!'

'And she was a true Trundel-Jones.'

'Yes.'

'So you can see how strong her feelings were,' Mr Lom permits himself a flicker, 'and as she never sold any of the stock, how considerable is her estate.'

Mr Lom pauses, but Jason is naturally anxious to continue :

'You said . . . considerable.'

Mr Lom nods as only a solicitor can when he has all the facts and his client has none : 'Considerable.'

'How much exactly is . . . considerable?'

Mr Lom presses his hands on the blotter, palms downwards : 'The whole estate, one half in trust, the other in Trundel International stock . . . perhaps two millions.'

Jason swallows, small silver objects the shape of sea-horses float before his eyes.

'Of course there are death duties, but not on the trust.'

Jason slowly points at himself; Mr Lom nods :

'But for one or two minor bequests, you are the sole beneficiary. . . . Your uncle, Mr Felix, will be very disappointed, being so close to the business, but that is the very reason Miss Bessie passed him by. However in his case it will not be the loss of money that will irritate, but the loss of power. You will inevitably hold a considerable proportion of Trundel International stock.'

To ease the tension, Jason reaches for Mr Lom's silver box, and takes a cigarette which Mr Lom is quick to light.

'But any problem you may have with Mr Felix will only be a minor matter.'

‘Minor!’

Mr Lom opens his top right-hand drawer, extracts a document and slowly turns the pages.

‘As I said, your great-aunt was a unique woman . . . a woman of the strongest prejudices. I hope we can talk as man to man?’

‘Of course.’

‘Her dislike of the firm was so violent that she made certain provisos. . . . With her, you understand, it was an obsession. She wanted you as her heir, but only on conditions. . . . She had a firm belief in the, ah, Unblemished Marriage, in which the partners come together . . . pure. Her own words were, “Like a union of milk and honey.”’

‘Pure!’

Mr Lom looks hard at the lampshade.

‘You could put it another way . . . virginal.’

Jason twists painfully in his chair, but Mr Lom is remorseless: ‘*Both parties, mind you* . . . to her this was of prime importance and stems from some action of your great-grandfather’s . . . she also believed that when they do come together it is for eternity.’

Jason’s jaw drops: ‘But that sort of attitude’s as old as the hills; besides, she never married, what the hell did she know about it?’

‘Nevertheless, it was her ideal, and, of course, in her later years, the permissive society was anathema to her,’ Mr Lom holds up his hands, ‘and whatever our private views might be, we must concede that she was entitled to her opinions.’

Jason tries hard to be magnanimous: ‘God bless the old dear, but that’s antediluvian.’

‘Not to her, Mr Reeve. As Miss Bessie saw it, the change has been entirely for the worse. To one holding the old values, promiscuity was far more upsetting than socialism, and that was bad enough. And she put everything down to the decline in religion, coupled with the rise of the family business.’ Mr Lom drops his voice. ‘I remember once, years ago, watching her solemnly burn a newspaper photograph

of Dr Marie Stopes, and, afterwards, slowly crunch up the charred paper with the heel of her shoe. I have never seen eyes so filled with hatred . . . not even in wartime.'

Jason is deeply shocked: 'In the seventies!'

Mr Lom's eyebrows rise, his mouth hardens and his face comes closer: 'Although at heart an ardent nonconformist, she seriously considered espousing the Church of Rome, simply because of the Encyclical!'

'God! What of Malthus?'

'Precisely . . . every arrow in her armoury was brought to bear . . . she was a very thorough woman . . . and *as for the Pill!*'

Mr Lom shakes his head. Jason covers his with both hands, and cries, 'The conditions . . . the provisos!'

Mr Lom opens the document: 'They're not easy . . .'

Jason groans.

' . . . but a very large sum of money is at stake.'

'Quickly.'

'In a nutshell . . . you inherit the entire estate provided you refrain from using, or allowing to be used in your presence, before or after marriage, with or without your convenience or consent; at any time of the day or night; on land, sea, or in the air; in this country or any other; any artificial method or article, chemical or drug, designed to hinder or destroy . . .'

'Enough!'

'Any IUD; diaphragm, sheath, foam, coil, pill . . .'

'What about *coitus interruptus*?'

'I'm sorry. That's considered an artificial method!'

'When does it start?'

'Your great-aunt wished to make it retrospective, but I managed to persuade her otherwise. It starts from the moment of her death at eleven minutes past ten last night . . .', and Mr Lom looks over the top of his glasses, ' . . . from that point till now, we shall have to take your word for it.'

Jason gives a weak nod: 'I went to bed early last night.'

'Excellent.'

Mr Lom rises and shakes hands.

'... You are a very fortunate young man.'

Mr Lom, brimming with warmth and goodwill, escorts Jason to the door: 'You need a holiday . . . and now you can afford somewhere different.'

Not unnaturally, Jason's unconscious leaps straight to lapping seas, drifting palms, steel bands, Bacardi, Captain Morgan and bronzed girls lying arms and legs akimbo all over the golden sands of the Caribbean.

'Trinidad . . . Acapulco?'

Mr Lom looks worried: 'Perhaps somewhere . . . a little less exotic.'

Mr Lom is, of course, thinking more of a month or two in Greenland, or a short stay with the British 'Transantarctic Expedition. He is also trying to take Jason's mind off the more inhibiting aspects of the bequest. It is not Mr Lom's fault that at the mention of 'holiday' Jason should rush off along the glossy brochure trail: 'Your late great-aunt hoped that a quiet holiday might guide you gently towards her Unblemished Marriage.'

The agony shows in Jason's face. Mr Lom allows himself a smile: 'It is not celibacy . . . and it is not meant to be celibacy, in the long run.'

'Uuuuugh!'

'We will keep in the closest touch, but, remember, whatever you do, don't tempt Fate. Set your sights high . . . look for Miss Right, *and keep away from all other women.*'

Jason's mouth falls with an audible click. The statement and its implications are so monstrous, he is blanched into silence. Mr Lom remains urbane: 'We don't want a young chap of your age getting all neurotic . . . full of frustration anxieties.' Mr Lom looks Jason over from the tip of his toes to the crest of his hair. 'It could be a strain, it could even be a considerable strain, but with your mind on other things to the great day, we should come through all right. Stick to games . . . football, cricket, snooker . . . cold baths

night and morning, keep your alcohol content low, substitute a small beer for a double whisky, eat in moderation, refrain from curries and overspiced Provençal dishes . . . particularly crayfish with Niçoise salade . . . rule out pimentos, cinnamon, nutmegs and cloves, keep away from X films, send any doubtful books you have to the jumble sales, keep away from magazine stalls; select prints, paintings and etchings with the utmost care, shun silk next to the skin and *never* wear a nightshirt. Remember, the moment you sniff wedding bells, let me know . . . ,’ and Mr Lom lowers his voice, ‘ . . . I’m not so old myself that I don’t understand, but I’ll put it this way: men have lived without it before. Not just monks, but in the Sudan, in fact throughout the Middle East, it was commonplace.’

Now, Mr Lom means these words to soften and sooth, but to Jason, smiling aimlessly, his heart is so heavy the cardiac muscles ache :

‘This isn’t the Sudan. . . . I am not a Fuzzy Wuzzy, I am a photographer . . . *a fashion photographer . . . women are my business!*’

With the most picturesque of legal smiles, Mr Lom slowly closes the door.

All over, tied with pink ribbon and sealed. A great-aunt, whom he can remember only as a black mountain capped with an ashen summit and overflowing from a rickety arm-chair, moving only to visit the outside privy when her huge frame blotted the daylight from a small boy’s eyes, has, with one flap of her cranky old wings, turned him into a schizophrenic—one half a Rockefeller, the other an Abelard. And what of Caroline (to name but one)? Neither Mr Sydney Lom nor Great-Aunt Bessie has paused to think of her. Worse than any bronco, eight seconds on Caroline’s back would make Hercules look a novice . . . the matter will have to be broached very gently, and in as devious a way as possible. Imagine discussing with Caroline such absurdi-

ties as 'not being able to . . .' and 'having to lay off the lay . . .' Caroline, her pubic hairs aflame with anger, screaming 'shit' and 'balls' . . . darling, delicate Caroline . . . he will have to release the information in minute instalments, ensuring his fingers are not bitten by the magazine-white teeth . . . and to achieve this he must practise feeding crumbs with a long pair of tongs to a hungry hippo. Thus does Jason Albion Reeve, two years down from Cambridge, tall, handsome, with fine brown sideburns, an immaculate cut to his Regency suit from Blades, grey with black piping, stand uncertain, still looking at Mr Lom's sombre door with the heavy, sad-faced knocker, pondering the staggering contrasts between his good and bad fortunes. The one so high, fit a brush on the end and it could clean the cornices of paradise; the other so low, it makes the drains of Hades appear Martian canals. And, of course, as with anyone in this predicament, first it is the one then the other that is paramount. One half of Jason, the half filled with the Trundel-Jones genes, is shouting joyously in unison with the endless tape, all in capitals: 'TWO MILLIONS LESS DEATH DUTY! TWO MILLI. . . .' that circulates inside his head, exciting all that is noble, decent and praiseworthy in the young man. The other half, that viler, baser half that has none of the Trundel-Jones in it, but rather is tainted with the blood of his father's side, the Reeves, cannot drag itself from the ominous crackle of Mr Sydney Lom as he too endlessly incants, only his incantations are the hated provisos set to a slightly adapted version of the melody from the Sarum Antiphonal.

Although for a while it is the joyous tape that dominates, when the sky clouds over and the rain dirties the pavements and no matter how hard he whistles no taxi stops, it is the voice of Mr Lom that takes over.

A bowed and despondent Jason hurries to the Tube, feeling that this is, anyway, a most suitable place, as his own life is now a tunnel with as much light at the other end as might be emitted from a wet book of matches. To choose

to be a monk is one thing, to have monkhood thrust upon one at the whim of a great-aunt and the law is another. He is not a professional celibate, and has never had any intention of being one. As for the solicitor's attempt to mitigate matters, with hints of the joys to be found behind the shutters of Mecca, to a professional man like himself, with two letters after his name, neither of which relate to the sort of esoteric activities suggested by Mr Lom, the whole of the previous discussion is brimming with cant. That is with the exception of one idea—the holiday.

Jason takes out his thick felt pen and writes: 'Divine justice rules. I now know God exists.' Then he lies on his bed with his hand on the telephone for nearly an hour. Uncle Felix must be rung, so must Caroline; both will be difficult. In the end Uncle Felix has priority, for his is a bachelor's establishment, staid and reliable, and although in the country, it reeks of London clubs, masculinity, leather and expensiveness, with its hideous furnishings, dark woodwork and snoring, dribbling dogs. Exactly the place Mr Lom would approve of. But Lower Brandy is so remote, even the operator takes several minutes to get through, and, when she does, the ice, even though it is midsummer, is thick.

Uncle Felix too knows about the will, and, as Mr Lom expected, he is none too happy.

'Jason here; I hoped we should be meeting at the funeral.'

'Ah!'

'Great-Aunt Bessie's on Thursday.'

'Indeed.'

Jason takes a deep breath:

'I should very much like to talk to you . . . about the will.'

Jason expects to hear a Wedgwood shatter; a glass splinter; or at least the sort of snort that blows all the fuses in the Post Office Tower. Instead, there is a complete *volte face*, that in view of the circumstances is quite inexplicable.

‘Why don’t we go together? Come down and meet *your* new aunt.’

If the sudden pleasant tones of his uncle are a surprise, full of the twelve days of Christmas, the contents of his uncle’s statement fill him with an astonishment that includes quick takes of werewolves with false teeth and a close-up of Cyclops’ forehead : ‘Aunt !’

‘Your Aunt Donna.’

Jason hesitates. Even his vivid imagination cannot produce a woman worthy of the name that could possibly be induced to marry Uncle Felix. What he will see at Lower Brandy may well be beyond his powers of endurance, but there are, of course, other considerations.

‘Love to.’

‘And I’ll get the Mare to meet you.’

Jason’s mind struggles even further, through ghoulish glades, along the bed of the Styx to the Pit of Gehenna. The Mare; the little man with the metal-framed glasses, all horses and teeth, who brought in the ‘London Art’ books and thumbed them in the hay behind the stalls. The Facts of Life with the Mare as entrepreneur . . . certainly as bad a start as having no mother and a faulty test-tube. Jason is amazed at his own powers of recovery : ‘I’ll drive, there’s no need to worry the Mare.’

But Uncle Felix, never one to waste time or listen to another for long, has already rung off.

His mother’s family, the Trundel-Joneses : the rock hidden just below the surface, the last bottle of oxygen, the ultimate in iron rations, only to be opened when all the oases are mirages and one’s back is so close to the wall that the bricks irritate. This was the first name he’d heard as a child in his widowed mother’s house high in the Blue Mountains of Jamaica; a sort of breathing with the vowels out, like the way the Hebrews said Jehovah. The Trundel-Joneses were never mentioned in the same breath as the Reeves, for

although his mother's marriage to a Reeve had apparently been happy (like Nelson, Jason's father died at the right moment and so avoided all those later, difficult years), she had undoubtedly married beneath her. After all, what is a librarian and poet? And worse, not even in private practice, but working for the County Council. Even their friend in Jamaica, the retired missionary, a simple godly man of strong but just controllable sodomistic tendencies, and the overlarge mulatto cook, whose greatest concern in life was constipation, both her own and Jason's, know of and revere the Trundel-Joneses. And the Trundel-Joneses are rich; immeasurably rich. They eat truffles, foie gras and caviar as ordinary people eat fish fingers, and it is the dividends from their shares that keep Jason's mother in luxurious invalid widowhood in her house high amongst the coffee plantations and bring Jason that modest biennial cheque, so useful when changing the car. No wonder then that now, with his return to the Trundel-Joneses imminent, Jason continues to lie nursing the phone, his thoughts milling between his distant past, his recent fortune, and doubtful future. And it is the doubtful future that reminds him of Caroline.

Buzz, buzz . . . buzz, buzz . . . (even her buzz, buzz is different). .

'Darling!'

'Darling!'

'Miss me?'

'I'll say.'

'Tell me.'

'Anything, darling.'

'Last night.'

'De . . . li . . . cious.'

Caroline's voice all languid, with each syllable dragged out and left lying about in the sun; all tanned and lap-lap-listen-to-the-waves-while-watching-the-droplets-on-my back.

'What time did you leave?'

'Time! What does time matter?'

'You had to get back and see your mother. So it was before ten.'

'Darling!'

'Before or after eleven minutes past ten?'

'You funny boy.'

'It's serious.'

'Diddums was tired . . . diddums wanted to go to bed early, remember? In fact, *diddums bloody well pushed me out!*'

'Before or after?'

'AFTER!'

'Christ!'

'Don't tell me you've forgotten after all you said? The longest the deepest . . . your home from home . . . your refuge . . . your haven . . . your port in a storm . . . your sun-trapped cove . . . your belt-hole . . . your sanctuary . . . your groove . . . your hangar.'

'Hangar!'

'You were the Airship and we were docking, remember?'

'God! I must have been high.'

'Diddums wasn't high . . . diddums was just playing his usual little games. You wanted a good flat run at it . . . across the grass.'

'Listen . . . I mean before or after ten?'

And bang goes the receiver at Caroline's end.

Buzz, buzz . . . buzz, buzz . . .

'Listen, was it before or after ten?'

'Darling! I'm so glad you rang again. I nearly forgot: before you played Airships, you tried Advanced Motoring. You kept going through the chicane—zzzzzzip—and giving a little twist.'

'Please . . .'

'Steering in and out without knocking the three empty lavatory rolls over . . . the ones you stood in the bed. It was

quite remarkable and ever so funny. I've been talking to Randy about it, he's on my lap.'

Then the Caroline laugh, low, tucked down in her gorgeous chin, finding its way past her auburn hair, the tapestry cushions, the lime-green couch and slate-coloured neutered cat with the large green eyes, euphemistically called Randy, to find itself eventually absorbed in the thick flock wallpaper.

'Just set my mind at rest. *Was it before or after ten?*'

'Come round and I'll tell you.'

'Nothing I'd love more . . . but . . .'

'Goodness. What's diddums doing now?'

Stung, bitten and feeling that he has suffered sufficient vilification for one day, Jason slams down the phone.

Buzz, buzz . . . buzz, buzz . . . (only this time in Jason's flat).

'Darling.'

'Darling.'

'I couldn't sleep . . . even Randy's restless. What's all this mystery about time?'

'My great-aunt died at eleven minutes past ten last night.'

'I'm terribly sorry, darling, but what am I meant to do—sound the Last Post?'

'You don't have to be facetious.'

'What's come over you?'

'My whole life's changed.'

'I didn't even know you knew her.'

'I didn't . . . not really.'

'Well then?'

'From the time of her death, everything has to be different . . . immaculate.'

'What does?'

'Unblemished . . . with a strong tendency towards the milk and honey.'

'Sounds absolutely delicious.'

'You don't understand . . . *what was I doing at eleven minutes past ten last night?*'

'Washing.'

'Washing!'

'You're always washing.'

'Isn't that a good thing?'

'Not when you keep jumping up.'

Jason trying to keep the excitement from his voice :

'Still, if I was washing, then . . . it was all over.'

Silence, followed by Caroline's voice at its very best :

'Sure you won't come round?'

'Certain.'

'I don't like the tone, that's not you.'

'It's the loss.' (Oh, for those hippo tongues.)

'How old was she?'

'Ninety-two.'

'Hell! What do you expect?'

'It's what she stood for.'

'What?'

'Values . . . indestructible, time-honoured values.'

Caroline is so puzzled, her gentle tickling of Randy's neck is fast becoming a scratch.

'You've never shown this sensitive side before.'

'Maturity.'

'Since last night?'

'It's like a revelation . . . like being on the road to Damascus.'

Caroline is lost :

'See you tomorrow at the studio then.'

'Afraid I'm off to the funeral, first thing.'

'What about the location work . . . the bras by Cleo's Needle?'

'It's only a week.'

'A week!'

'Cards . . . flowers . . . the laying out.'

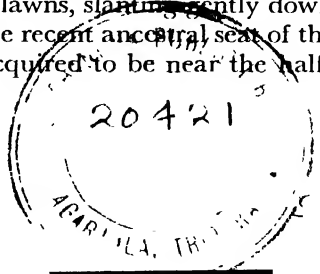
'What is she, a pharaoh?'

And although they close with a whole range of personal noises, Jason knows that Caroline is far from pleased and that nothing has been solved.

Two

THE JOURNEY to Lower Brandy takes three and a half hours, and it is surprising how clear, as the miles behind Jason increase and those in front correspondingly decrease, the past can be. The wrought-iron gates, the squat church tower, the high hedgerows bending with blackberries in the autumn; Jason a fair, long-haired child on the lawn; and Uncle Felix, then almost a dashing figure in his yellow and black biplane, flying over the beeches, waving from the open cockpit, his goggles mercifully hiding the greater part of his face. Uncle Felix, who by dint of struggle, enterprise and application has made the business great, and who should, if justice were to be done, inherit Great-Aunt Bessie's fortune. Soon there will be nothing between them but the dinner table. Uncle and nephew growling like dogs with a single bone. But what of the inexplicable *volte face*? Did Uncle Felix's new wife tap him on the shoulder, peer over her golden pince-nez and remind him of his blood pressure? Aunt Donna . . . how proud the Old Man sounded when he said the name . . . retired Newgate wardress? . . . elderly, arthritic chorus-girl? . . . or merely someone wanting British nationality? . . . No doubt smelling of tweed with a skin like a pomegranate's and expensively capped teeth. With a growing interest in the sort of person prepared to marry a difficult Trundel-Jones in the last throes of middle age, even allowing for the fortune, Jason drives steadily towards the setting sun.

Lower Brandy Manor, that white-walled, grey-slatted jewel set in the midst of perfect lawns, sloping gently down to the broad lily-strewn lake. The recent ancestral seat of the Trundel-Joneses, deliberately acquired to be near the half-



timbered cottage where old William Trundel, or, as he was known in the district, 'Billy Long Branch', laboriously stirred his bubbling latex with the home-carved spoon. Lower Brandy Manor, each brick, stone, slate and cobble brimming with warmth and sincerity, womblike in winter's frost and summer's heat, whether yellow leaves lie on the thick damp turf and the trees are nothing but gibbets, and lights, blood red, pour through the velvet curtains; or high summer when the house, hidden from three points of the compass by ancient beeches, is best seen reflected in the lake. When inverted walls shimmer white, the grey roof is lost in the meadow bank, and in the evenings the blood-red rectangles, doubled in number, pulsate in the darkness. Into this sylvan setting, this Gibraltar of the present Trundel-Jones, drives Jason Albion Reeve, wealthy nephew, and man with a problem.

The woman lying on two cushions on the terrace raises deep brown eyes and slowly closes her book as Jason, hot and thirsty after his drive, approaches. Taking this languid creature, whose looks are certainly not English, to be the *au pair* or Spanish cook having a quiet sunbathe while the mistress is out fishing, and being himself both a member of the family and a large stock-holder, Jason not unnaturally wishes to ensure that this beauty with no more than a work permit shall know from the start that he is no travelling salesman. He therefore smiles sweetly, bounces lightly on his right foot to emphasise his familiarity with the ground and sense of being back, and says, with the greatest confidence: 'Anyone at home?'

Now the beautiful woman in front of him, with the closed book on her lap and legs bent under showing nothing more than the knee and traces of the thigh, is none other than the lonely and welcoming Aunt Donna, *née* Hamdonna Ben Mamoum, the niece of Uncle Felix's Middle Eastern business associate, whose presence at Lower Brandy is mainly the result of a franchise to manufacture certain of Uncle Felix's products in Arabia together with a large transfer of

shares by Uncle Felix to Hamdonna's uncle. When she hears these well-spoken words from this tall handsome Englishman with the side-whiskers, frilly cuffs and Regency cut to the jacket, Donna looks up with those dark melting *éclair* eyes and says: 'Home?'

'My uncle's . . . and what about a drink, a good stiff one?'

Although Donna has been waiting on the terrace for Jason's arrival for over two hours, and during that time on numerous occasions rearranged both cushions, hair, body and legs, so that when Jason should eventually appear his first view would leave him as breathless as Hernando Cortés on first sighting the shining gold of Montezuma's palace, yet when Jason advances towards her in this high-handed attitude, wiping his brow and calling for a drink, at the same time reminding her that this is his uncle's house, much of the feeling engendered during his very brief walk from the car is dissipated: 'Your uncle is out, and if you are thirsty, there's a pump in the yard.'

Were it not for her beautiful face, extraordinary figure and delicate hair-flow, Jason would have felt deeply hurt by so very insulting and inhospitable a reaction to his simple question. As it is, he decides that this delectable creature is of an endless aristocratic lineage and that while needing sterling to prolong her stay, is in fact the daughter of no less a personage than the Mufti of Wadi Jebel or the equivalent. Nothing else could explain such a haughty attitude. It is the sight of the broad, high-carat wedding ring nestling next to the large solitaire diamond that drives the first tiny sap into his self-confidence. Not that at this stage he even considers that this woman might be the new Aunt Donna, for such a creature as this could never be persuaded down any aisle or through any register office door with Uncle Felix. She might, however, be an honoured guest; and Jason therefore decides to turn the whole pump in the yard crack into a merry joke, calling on all his training in etiquette and good manners.

'Water is for camels,' he says, with a smile.

While being a woman of hot and fiery disposition, Donna is also intelligent, and beneath the beautiful, classical oval face and jet-black hair there is as shrewd a mind as any in Uncle Felix's corps of economists. Lonely and saddened by her stay in England, Donna has resolved that, to survive, she must do all she can to jettison her upbringing and absorb this new culture. Thus, living here in the midst of the country, she is working hard to assimilate the habits of the people: studying fox-hunting, porcelain, bedding hyacinths, boned ham, Ceylon tea and compost construction, while taking lessons in water-colour painting and acting as President of both the Lower Brandy Woman's Institute and the local League of Cruel Sports. Jason's music-hall joke, therefore, is at the moment, and in view of his earlier truculent attitude, ill-timed and unfortunate, and makes Donna draw in her lips and suck in the air, almost bringing a whistle. However, Donna, besides being lonely, is an Arab, and one of the hallmarks of her civilisation is kindness to strangers, and particularly kindness to travelling strangers, and although Jason is not crawling, cracked-lipped, to a drying oasis, his hand out in a piteous gesture and his steed a living skeleton, he is nevertheless thirsty in the traditional English way. So, giving one further glance at his profile and upright bearing, Donna's heart melts, all her ferocity drains away, and she turns towards him and says, with all the gentleness of her sex: 'Come inside.'

Which Jason does with alacrity.

Over two ice-cold glasses of Veuve Clicquot Ponsardin '64, Donna slowly releases her secret. Not unnaturally, Jason at first believes this to be merely the return joke for the camel, and that Donna's sense of humour is so lacking that she can think of nothing better, or that in the souks even the idea of anyone of Donna's beauty marrying Uncle Felix is guaranteed to send every jinn and sweet-maker rushing to the public urinals. It is only when he sees the corner of her eye and the firm edges to her lips that he really

begins to worry, and when he is seized by a panic that sweeps upwards with paralytic effect from his feet he realises that for the first time in his life he knows the true meaning of human sacrifice. They drink their second and third glasses in complete silence, Jason still trying to digest and understand. But the longer he looks at Donna, and the better his recollection of his uncle, the more difficult becomes the problem. Nor is the photo of Uncle Felix in uniform in the silver case by the leather-bound copy of *Money Talks* any help, but rather a hindrance and a confusion of all that is rational. Only by thrusting his spare hand deep into his trouser pocket and pinching himself hard on the thigh is he able to convince himself that he is not watching a play by the Marquis de Sade or sitting out a jig with Jack Ketch.

The novel idea of taking himself quietly to the country has appealed to Jason all morning, and he has been looking forward to it in the belief that to be returning to the deepest roots of mankind, amongst fields of golden corn, later to be symbolically torn and refurbished by farmer and fertiliser, would be to go back to such primeval roots that he would find again those blessings that bring peace to mankind, and to the troubled soul; the sort of tranquillity only found by the youngest suckling on the nipple. Also, of course, in getting away from Caroline and into the country, he can begin his acquaintanceship with the milk and honey, so beloved of his late great-aunt. Such should have been Jason's return to Lower Brandy Manor, where years ago he watched the foal born in the paddock and then, in the shelter of the log pile, found the young parlourmaid 'experimenting' with a young village lad whose main claim to fame up to that time was the length of his legs. But this was the old Lower Brandy, not the house that Donna is slowly stamping with her own strong personality. Tea and crumpets, large shaggy dogs sniffing at thick field boots coated with manure beside

fishing tackle and waders now keep company with Isfahan and other exotic carpets; heavily scented flowers add a new dimension to the faint tones of taped Eastern music, and rare perfumes jostle with the stale smells of the pipe-racks. But if the house is changing, this appears at first sight to be true also of Uncle Felix.

After the experience of the afternoon and the stunning shock of the union, it is with new eyes that Jason sees his uncle on the latter's return to Lower Brandy that evening. Grudging admiration mingled with vicarious interest help him to notice for the first time that now he is a little greyer and slightly thinner round the neck his uncle has a faint air of distinction previously lacking, and adding in his considerable fortune and the position any consort of his might expect, the marriage, although unlikely, is not quite so impossible as he had first thought. There is also his uncle's bearing. Jason can only put this down to the rejuvenating effect such a wife as Donna must have upon any man, and realises that were she to have met Methuselah, the old patriarch's continued virility would have been the headlines scratched on every tablet in the tents of Israel well into his nine hundred and sixty-ninth year. For his part, Uncle Felix is obviously proud of his new possession, and shows her to Jason exactly as he would show a potential client his box at Ascot.

It is in this puzzled state, with Mr Lom's words working away subliminally, and no mention of will or funeral that they move in to dinner.

While the Mare, Christian names Albert George Henry, almost delirious with joy at seeing his protégé again, shuffles round the table with the mushroom soufflé, winking at Jason from beyond the candles and in so doing giving a perfect impression of Richard's return from Bosworth Field, Jason quietly considers his own situation. He is midway between Donna and Uncle Felix, and while trying hard

to listen to all his uncle is saying, finds his eyes constantly drawn back towards his aunt. And they are not drawn back by any sense of politeness, but rather by a perfectly natural desire to dwell more on the face and neck of this pretty Daughter of the Prophet than on the slightly rough and pimply visage of his own close relative. Then in one cornea-blasting flash of revelation, Jason appreciates the bewildering extent of his own good fortune. By picking up the phone and choosing Lower Brandy seven two rather than Caroline's number, he is able to look, almost microscopically, upon what must be one of the most beautiful combinations of face, shoulders and neck, while still obeying the injunction given to him by Mr Lom. For if there is one thing certain, and one thing he would be willing to wager his new orange Lotus Europa on, it is that he would never be tempted to look at his aunt in any other than the proper way, and no imaginable degree of provocation could ever bring him to deceive his uncle. It is now, therefore, a warm and happy Jason that eats and drinks his way through one of the most pleasant evenings he can remember, and it is only when he puts his hand down to stop his napkin falling from his knees, and the tips of his fingers touch Donna's lap, that he recalls the hideous provisos. And so, although giving silent thanks that his introduction and close proximity to Donna should coincide with the unveiling of Great-Aunt Bessie's will, when he raises the excellent Lafitte-Rothschild and drains the glass there are embryonic tears. He is not sorry when his uncle shatters this maudlin world with the words, 'Aunt Bessie's funeral tomorrow.'

Caroline darling,

God, how I miss you! Girding my loins for tomorrow . . . the Old Lady goes under at two . . . entertaining another old aunt, equally difficult. Keep at it. Every drop of love,
Jason

The letter is dated, but there is no address.

Three

THE JOURNEY to Bradhurst Cross is a difficult one. Swaddled with Uncle Felix in the Park Ward bodywork of the primrose Silver Shadow, with every pane of Sundyn glass firmly shut to allow the fully refrigerated air-conditioning to function smoothly, Jason has not only to avoid the ever-watching, suggestive eyes of the Mare in the driving mirror, and suffer Uncle Felix's remorse, but has also, over a picnic lunch of Charentais melon, Solent prawns and Chichester clams, washed down with a bottle of iced Chablis from the Valnour vineyards, to await the inquisition he believes must come. But he has no need to fear, for ever since the first news of Great-Aunt Bessie's death, Uncle Felix has been making new plans, plans that are only in abeyance today because of the solemnity of the occasion. Even as Jason continues his light-hearted banter, and Uncle Felix finds it difficult to take his eyes off the young man's clothes and hair, already the Chairman of Trundel International is slipping away, prepared for the long vigil by the family cenotaph. With his head towards the tree and a fine mist crossing his eyes, in a voice crackling with emotion, Uncle Felix whispers: 'She was one nearer than I was.'

Jason, unsure of the context, is mystified, but the agony on the elder man's face is so intense that he leans forward, touches his uncle's arm and asks most sympathetically: 'She?'

'Your Great-Aunt Bessie.'

'Nearer?'

'The Founder . . . and Inventor.'

'Ah!'

‘Of course in those days it wasn’t called Trundel International, just Roger’s Hot Vats.’

Jason now appreciates that all that must pass in the next hour and a half will make this sunny afternoon as poignant as any in the whole of Uncle Felix’s fifty-two years.

They should have arrived at the church at two, but an error in the Mare’s navigation brings them to a ford where the lane disappears under a deceptively beautiful carpet of watercress. The subsequent backing is marred by a tractor whose driver is only fully convinced that a Rolls being driven backwards is not some new form of scramble or auto-cross when Uncle Felix runs down the electrically operated window, completely nullifying the air-conditioning, and explains in short expletives. The clock on the tower of Bradhurst Cross Church shows a quarter past two when, looking neither to his left, where the ex-Ministry of Works repainted mini-bus stands with its rear doors open, the coffin poised within four inches of its centre of gravity, nor to his right, where the vicar stands wiping his brow, contemplating forty days in a hot waterless desert and appreciating for the first time the real magnitude of the Temptation, Uncle Felix leads the way to the porch. If inside there is a certain asymmetry it is entirely due to the Black Death and Rural Depopulation, for with the village filling the rear pew, the family and Mr Sydney Lom have been left the front twenty-seven. However Uncle Felix, who has often walked through a hall full of shop stewards without showing a trace of nerves, is unabashed, and, retaining sufficient momentum from his march to the porch, stirringly emulates Lord Cardigan, gazing neither at the Fedioukine nor Causeway windows, his eyes firmly fixed on the belching cannons on either side of the altar. After a short skirmish with the hassock of the front right-hand pew, which he beats with the same silver cane used to communicate with the Mare, Uncle Felix leads his nephew in a short prayer, his own loosely based on Our Father, but including the hope that

the Almighty will look favourably upon the trading activities of Trundel International during the current financial year.

But to Jason, acting rearguard to his uncle during the long walk down the nave, things are different. As they enter the church, his younger eyes, quicker to focus to the new lower level of illumination, are able to sweep along the single occupied pew and in that millisecond before he and Uncle Felix turn eastwards he is able to sort the wheat from the chaff. And most of Bradhurst Cross are undoubtedly chaff. In fact, were it not for the girl staring up at him, a young woman whose noble brow shows intellect, and whose eyes of the deepest brown, even in the gloom of the interior, shine with natural inbred excitement, and whose dress shows defiance to all; were it not for this girl, Jason would hold out no hope for the survival of life as we know it at Bradhurst Cross, for even in that brief glimpse he is able to see that further procreation is hardly likely here. During the ensuing stillness, therefore, the young woman, and her possible reasons for gracing such an otherwise graceless pew, are never far from his thoughts.

The Rev. Terence Stonor-Green has bad indigestion. Tight shoes and the heat are adding to his irritation. He has waited at the lych-gate for twenty minutes, tapping his tightly enclosed toes and drumming on the prayer-book, before seeing the Rolls, chauffeur and the occupants in suits so soft they make his own harsh, slinky worsted seem like hessian. With the Tenth Commandment in tatter and parts of the Sermon on the Mount badly tarnished, the Rev. Stonor-Green has no difficulty in persuading himself that the duet of family mourners must wish, as an act of atonement, to accompany Bloody-Minded Bessie's body the whole length of its penultimate journey. He therefore dispatches the local Sarah Bernhardt crabwise down the aisle so that this lady may, with a sweep of her arm towards the two decorator's trestles standing scrubbed and carefully spaced beneath the chancel arch, look Uncle Felix in the

eye and declaim: 'The poor dear awaits without . . . *for you!*' As this is no boardroom decision, but rather an autocratic demand, Uncle Felix can do no more than lead Jason in the retreat. To Jason, however, this return march is a joy, giving him a further and much longer look at the girl in the shiny black dress and a chance to confirm his previous diagnosis. Not only is she intelligent in a way that Caroline is not, but also she has a cheerful innocence and bounding good nature shown when they catch one another's eyes (a remarkably simple operation), for she neither flinches, lowers her head, nor in any other way tries to hide below the carved front of the medieval pew.

If some consider Uncle Felix lacking in certain qualities and at times a little insensitive, the shareholders of Trundel International must be thankful for the two noble traits that dominate his whole character to the exclusion of all others: his love of finance and his single-mindedness. Even now, during the brief nodding and forming-up period at the lych-gate, Uncle Felix is busy.

'Margins!'

This solitary word shouted back to Jason while the younger man takes up his position, and amplified almost immediately by the past participle 'reduced' used as an adjective, together with a sad shake of his own head, is just one example of the two aforesaid traits, in combination. And Jason's response to this boardroom gem is sympathetic, for he knows that it is only by keeping such matters in the forefront of his mind day and night that Uncle Felix has made himself and the business great.

'I've a report in the car.'

'I'd love to see it.'

Uncle Felix is pleased that at last he can see a glimmer of promise in his only sister's son. Jason is pleased that there is no animosity and that at last he and his uncle are closing ranks. Both show their pleasure, innocently and unashamedly. In fact the only person to find no pleasure in either their faces or words is the Rev. Terence Stonor-Green, who

shows his annoyance by the speed with which he drops his handkerchief and sends the simple cortège away through the broken tombstones.

First, a perilous trip to the porch; a windjammer-bosun-turned-under-taker bringing Great-Aunt Bessie to her final dock with soft burred commands of, 'Cast away', 'Steady as she goes', and a throttled cry of 'Fend off!' when a sudden gust of wind brings elm and stone together at the difficult right turn. Then the long stare at the bas-relief on the Norman font. Jason sitting, standing and praying for fifteen minutes, only a yard away from a stunted saint, three topless women, three gold coins and a scowling procurer, now obviously deprived by the machinations of a meddling ascetic. And it is in fact the deprived man, with one leg chipped away, together with the greater portion of his manhood, that fixes Jason's eye and so saddens him that they are nearing the Rev. Stonor-Green's final words before he is sufficiently recovered to notice how little breasts have changed over nine hundred years and that, making allowances for the rubbings of generations of over-zealous flower arrangers, the middle pair certainly come well up to Caroline's standard. Luckily, as his thoughts turn to Caroline, the Rev. Stonor-Green ushers them from the shadows of the church to the shining white hole in the chalk.

For Uncle Felix, too, this is a difficult moment. Not only is the emotion engendered in seeing a Trundel-Jones undergoing the final possessionless dust-to-dust run almost more than he can bear (even though this particular Trundel-Jones made the unique act of renouncing riches in her youth), but added to this is the same nagging remorse that has beset him all day: how little he did for Aunt Bessie in her lifetime. (Even while the Rev. Stonor-Green is making all those pointed comments from in front of the altar rails, Uncle Felix is checking his five-year-old calculations on the cost of installing either electricity or mains water in the crumbling cottage. As he expects, in view of the state of the property, it would not have been uneconomic even in the

unlikely event of Aunt Bessie accepting his offer.) Then Uncle Felix also sees the font, and although he takes a long time to understand the plot, being far more used to reading graphs, columns of figures or simple words like 'up, down, bear and bull', printed on pink paper, when at last the meaning becomes clear the shock is no less than were the Director of the National Gallery to see a tramp wheeling his pet Giotto down Whitehall in a pram. Instantly four questions tease Uncle Felix as he sits in the front right-hand pew: What was the cost of gold in A.D. 1100? Did the retailer with the halo get it wholesale? How much has it appreciated? And wouldn't a cheaper initial investment have been sufficient? For a Trundel-Jones in the true business line not to know the answer to questions like these is as excruciating in its way as the Nuremberg Maiden. Uncle Felix is therefore a very frustrated man when they adjourn to Great-Aunt Bessie's cottage to have tea and view the shambles.

Jason by the cottage door watching for black shiny dress, casting his eyes along the path, back to the church, under the branches of the yew, beyond the corrugated-iron transformer hut, past the oak bus shelter, the larch telephone pole, around the brick village hall, through the lace curtains, till Uncle Felix irritably beckons him inside.

Great-Aunt Bessie's sitting room bears witness to her multiple interests. The room is dominated by a double bed with sagging springs and a round table, three of whose feet resemble the claws of a lion, the fourth unidentifiable, the carving chiropodist having been suddenly mauled down in his prime. By the wall, where the damp rises and sparkles through the painted plaster, stands a Victorian couch, supporting its fractured frame on three books. Other books and old timetables cover the floor. Two flags hang from the wall opposite the mullioned window; the larger from an Amazonian river steamer; the smaller, a tattered relic of

the Franco-Prussian War, given to Aunt Bessie by an early admirer. On the floor by the door, a chamber-pot, opulent and fluted, with a Rubensesque pattern, is the resting place for a stout stick and a brass trumpet. There are two saddles, green with mould, and a single riding boot still containing its wooden stretcher, and in the corner by the window stands the remains of a Chinese upright cupboard on a washstand of blue marble. But it is the pictures that dominate and catch Jason's eye. Pictures in the sitting room, the small hallway and narrow stairs: oils and water-colours, many mouldy, nearly all peeling: pictures stacked by the walls and stacked on the floors, mostly small, but here and there a canvas that might have served Van Dyck for a cartoon of the mounted Stuart King. It is at this moment, as Jason is wondering on his great-aunt's diligence as a collector, as the Rev. Stonor-Green demonstrates the woodpecker's methods of attacking the church tower by placing his own long nose close to a piece of stale fruit cake, and Uncle Felix decides that the best use for the site would be to tear down the old cottage and erect a petrol filling station with a memorial plaque, that Jason hears the cheerful voice by his side saying: 'Are you by any chance Mr Jason Albion Reeve?'

And there is shiny black dress, long blonde curls running down her back, smiling up at him with all the cheer normally associated with an incoming Prime Minister. Jason is surprised, happy and only too delighted to instantly admit to being Jason Albion Reeve. The girl identifies herself simply as Merle, a name Jason decides is adorable, though he has never previously thought about it. But, of course, even when a pretty young girl of perhaps twenty walks into a room such as this, singles you out from all others, comes up to your elbow and asks whether you are in fact yourself, the euphoria wears off in time and then the questions arise. And not the least amongst the questions is what will Mr Lom say? Although Jason's natural desires are to be friendly and even for a short while try to forget the provisos, the

lawyer's actual presence only helps reinforce his insidious words, making Jason unnaturally cautious: 'There are, of course, several Jason Albion Reeves.'

The girl gives a wry smile that goes through Jason's suit like a recently sharpened baselard: 'But you're *the* Jason Albion Reeve.'

Jason continues to look doubtful, but the girl has the scent: 'Let me explain . . .'

With Merle's voice near, dulcet, full of muted sackbut, Mr Lom's voice almost inaudible, Jason deciding that never has there been such a funeral and what a lot he owes his Dear Old Aunt, there comes the wide-screen *delirium tremens*. From the grey minivan that bumps to a halt half in the dry ditch, a leopard-skin emerges, shakes itself, looks over its shoulder, drapes its auburn hair carefully and then walks slowly and with easy hip movements towards the cottage. And even from where he is standing, between the Rev. Stonor-Green and Merle, Jason has absolutely no problem in identifying the strong, grating, angry tones of Caroline as she calls to the Mare: 'Is this the Trundel-Jones grave-in?'

Knowing that only apocalyptic emotions could have forced Caroline first to the announcement column of *The Times*, then all the way to Bradhurst Cross, and that any confrontation in this mood, particularly in front of the inquisitive eyes of Mr Sydney Lom, would be disastrous, Jason slides away from Merle without a word of explanation, and after a circuitous but rapid journey through the assembly, slips into Great-Aunt Bessie's very dusty back garden. He knows, too, that there can be few hiding places in such a small village where anyone can spot a stranger instantly, and that should he return to the Rolls not only would he be unprotected from the winks and insinuations of the Mare, but also that even if he locked all the doors there would be nothing to stop Caroline clawing on the windows, ripping open the Everflex roof or forcing her way past the picnic hamper and in through the boot. Without

hesitation, therefore, he makes for the only safe place : the small wooden shed standing so English amidst the luxuriant forest of interwoven soft-fruit bushes : Great-Aunt Bessie's cedarwood privy.

The boast of both the Peacocks and the Trundel-Joneses that their offspring are breast-fed is the extent of the similarity in their upbringing. Merle Peacock's father, after a long trial period, is only now reaching success in his chosen profession of car-park attendant. This has naturally placed the family load on Merle's mother, who by industry and thrift has brought up her seven children to be clean and honest, and in the particular case of Merle herself has allowed her to complete not only her years at the County High but a subsequent period at Art School. And such love and devotion from her mother has more than made up for the waywardness of her father and given Merle far greater confidence than might be expected. It is therefore with complete equanimity that Merle sees Jason firmly shut the door of Great-Aunt Bessie's privy with such force that an overhanging branch loosens its ripest fruits to scatter like shrapnel. Having three younger brothers, Merle is suddenly perfectly understanding of Jason's precipitate departure and is only sorry that she herself was too slow to see his problem and foolish enough to catch him at the wrong moment. Feeling the sun on her back and thinking what a perfect day it is, she keeps a polite distance, exactly as her mother would have wished, and there she waits, humming quietly to herself and plucking at the lavender that grows with such profusion, rolling it in the palms of her hands, then holding the dark sodden ball near her nose and breathing in and out with long tender sighs. In this position she is joined by a bewildered, ill-tempered, heavily urbanised Caroline who, sniffing at the strong country air, sinks her chin deeper into the collar of her leopard-skin dress and tucks the three rows of beads directly under her nose. At the same moment that a compassionate Merle hands her

a ball of crushed lavender, Mr Sydney Lom saunters out into the sunshine.

Even in Bradhurst Cross, Great-Aunt Bessie's privy is a scandal. Unsound internally and externally, unhygienic, freezing in winter, suffocating in summer, harbour for wasps and woodworm, it is exactly the place that if the Minister of Housing saw it would be re-erected at the entrance to Charing Cross Station, both as a public warning and as an example of the work of the previous Government. As it is, the Minister is never likely to see it, for with Great-Aunt Bessie's death her neighbours are only waiting for the finish of the funeral rites to burn the edifice and then bury the remains in quicklime. However, in the meantime as Jason's sanctuary it is fulfilling a role that Great-Aunt Bessie, with all her wisdom and concern for the future, never foresaw.

From where he sits Jason can see through the wide cracks in the wooden door, and nothing he sees, not even the idyllic scene, is at all pleasing. First there are the two leach-like girls, whiling away the hours with simple pastoral amusements that by the seraphic looks on their faces are unlikely to pall for a very long time. And secondly there is the dark, ominous form of Mr Sydney Lom, deliberately casting sideways glances at both girls from the bird table on the overgrown lawn. When Mr Lom adds smiles to his glances, Jason knows his actions must be quick and drastic. Now one of Great-Aunt Bessie's obsessions was snow; and a recurrent dream that used in her younger days to send her shivering across the badly tilting cottage floor in her thick flannel nightdress to the small whisky bottle always handy in the spare wash-jug, was the fear of being marooned in her privy during the depths of winter by an exceptionally sudden and violent snowstorm. As a precaution, therefore, a small toboggan was always kept outside the privy, and a shovel inside. And it is that shovel, rusty now and with the handle rotting, but still hanging on the windward wall, that Jason now spies, and upon which he pins his hopes.

With remarkably clear memories of the Wooden Horse; knowing that at last he has an opportunity to test his own capabilities; moving carefully to avoid annoying the indigenous insects, Jason sets to work on the blind side of the privy—blind, that is, so far as Caroline and Merle are concerned. It is not his intention to construct a Todt Organisation tunnel complete with timber shoring and air conditioning, but rather to scoop a shallow trench under the rotting cedar wall, lie flat and wriggle through. After three spadefuls of earth are discharged down the hole, he is able to remove the bottom two boards and slide out directly between the runner beans. With cover on either side, it is surprisingly easy for him to make his way through the wild hinterland of Great-Aunt Bessie's garden, and from there follow his uncle into the quiet sanctuary of the Rolls. Crouched on the thick pile carpet of that immaculate vehicle, Jason is relieved to see that neither Caroline nor Merle has an inkling of his departure.

It is not until they are on the way home and the excellent circulatory system is extracting the full range of scents from Jason's clothes that Uncle Felix cross-examines the Mare as to what entered the car while they were all seeing that a Trundel-Jones received a proper burial, and Jason, for the first time, is fully aware of the extent of his experience.

Merle too is amazed. Long after the last mourner and a bored, puzzled Caroline have left, she tiptoes to the little cedar shed, and, most courageously, first knocks, then pushes gently on the door, only to find it still locked. Assuming that something cataclysmic has happened to the occupant, the nice young man with a twinkle in his eye to match her own, she now approaches one of the cracks, feeling that at such a time all normal decorum must be swept away. When she sees no one, Merle's highly strung, overwrought mind almost snaps, and but for her Englishness, and the inhibiting sight of the Rev. Stonor-Green counting Trundel-Jones notes for the third time in the vicarage window, she would

have battered on the door and shouted for help. As it is, she walks round the back of the tottering structure, and when she sees the recently dug hole, missing boards and footprints between the runner beans, she realises that Jason Albion Reeve is an extremely insecure young man, calling urgently for the services of a well-practised, outward-looking psychoanalyst.

After the worries and hazards of Bradhurst Cross, a bath and two stiff martinis, it is to Donna, that *ez zezour* of Arabia, that Jason goes. Although it is summer and the day still memorably warm, Donna lies on two large cushions that partly obscure the fine silken Isfahan carpet, right in front of the flickering electric log that fills the old stone fireplace. Jason, seeing two elements glowing and his anxieties only slowly subsiding under the alcohol, is far too brusque: 'On a day like this!'

Unbeaten, defiant, Donna raises two precise eyebrows and says: 'One bar.'

Jason opens his shirt collar. The woman is either a complete liar or has very poor eyesight: 'Two.'

'One little bar.'

At this point Jason should realise that there is nothing to be gained from continuing the exchange and that if his aunt wishes to suggest that hell itself is a celestial deep-freeze he should not contradict. But Jason has had a difficult day. Already one woman has forced him into violent evasive action, so now when another aggravates him even further he is loth to let the matter drop quickly: 'Two bars . . . any fool can see.'

Donna lifts her pointed face, smooth, oval and olive-skinned beneath the long hair: 'A woman must be kept warm.'

Jason sees the knee of one hidden leg with the skin pressed tight in the wide mesh of the stocking and he can remember the remainder without any draughtsman's aids. He can

also see the smile, the smile that Donna is able to flash whenever she wishes to melt her way through nickel-chrome or plate glass. Although the sight of the knee knocks the first wedge from under him, it is the smile that tells Jason of his utter defeat and that all his efforts to persuade Donna to be logical in the simple matter of differentiating between one and two are as pointless as if he were to try to teach her calculus, clasped in each other's arms beneath her golden eiderdown. With a painful swallow he thrusts everything from his mind and speaks of the moving nature of the morning's ceremony. But Donna is far from pleased with this switch, preferring the piquancy of the earlier discussion, where, although her ability to calculate was questioned, at least she was the subject. She therefore raises her fine, manicured hands and with a most expressive gesture abounding with resentment says: 'She'll have a fine Trundel-Jones tombstone.'

Jason, still in the early stages of his acquaintanceship with his aunt, is surprised by the smouldering nature of this reply:

'That is a cry of pure distress!'

Jason is quite old enough to know when to stop, and if diamonds are one way to a woman's heart, another is by the careful use of argument. Although he should now be listening to the faint voice of Mr Lom, that little devilish urge that has sent better men over the edges of volcanoes, up unnavigable rivers and across trackless wastes of scrub and thorn now forces him along the dangerous byway that can only lead to the Bitter Lakes, yet might still provide one or two fine views *en route*:

'The cry of a most unhappy woman . . . the mayday of one stranded on the beach . . . to hear it tears my heart.'

Donna, who at this moment is in the throes of a deep emotional whirlpool, and is making her last effort to keep everything simple and where it should be, knows that in the very close, private presence of this young man she cannot remain on the slipway without chocks much longer.

When the drag chains start to move, she remembers her childhood: 'We have a saying . . .'

'Good.'

'Although the top of the camel's dung may be crisp . . . beware of the filling!'

Jason nods, suddenly filled with cool appreciation: 'It is the same here with the cow.'

And they exchange smiles so full of understanding that were only one to have been speaking Venusian, the other would have had no difficulty in dotting the '*'s and crossing the '/'s.

Uncle Felix, still recovering from the trauma of the day, hand over the telephone mouthpiece, turning to Jason: 'Some girl.'

'Girl!'

'This afternoon at Bradhurst Cross.'

Jason making hopeless goldfish motions.

'She seems to think you did the Indian rope trick . . . from the privy.'

Uncle Felix holds out the phone, and there is Jason walking the plank in front of Aunt and Uncle, with his aunt's eyes flashing such Islamic fires that were she to be back in her native land the sands around her tent would be fused to the finest cut glass. Jason holds the phone for a very long time before quietly thanking the Almighty it is Merle at the other end and not Caroline.

'I missed you.'

'Yes.'

'You're a bit of a Houdini.'

Jason giving a torn-ligament-in-the-back laugh.

'Look, I'm terribly sorry if I caught you at the wrong moment this afternoon, but I've got to see you.'

Got to . . . got-to-got-to-got-to . . . as if seeing him were life's thread, and then the question-parade . . . her knowing his name . . . the things Caroline said while fondling the

lavender . . . and worse, the ominous hints dropped by the sombre Mr Sydney Lom.

'Got to?'

'Yes.'

'Me?'

'Of course.'

Between them, Caroline and Mr Lom have done irreparable damage.

'That's not easy.'

'I can come over.'

'It's a difficult place to find.'

Merle, realising that this young man's need of a psychoanalyst remains undiminished, resolves upon tact: 'I've driven a Land Rover across Afghanistan.'

'Afghanistan is comparatively simple.'

'Listen, I think there's been a mistake.'

Mistake . . . ha . . . ha . . . and her all innocent. It's Mr Sydney Lom's doing . . . see that chap over there? . . . the one digging his way out of the privy . . . funny business, really, but he's under restraint and surveillance . . . not allowed to . . . at any time of the day or night, east or west of the International Date Line . . . of course, I've warned him about the usual things . . . (and then the frightful *verboden* list) . . . you see, everything now has to be dedicated to the 'Richer or Poorer Handicap' . . . of course, if he falls by the wayside (Mr Sydney Lom's cold grey eyes running up towards both mini-skirts, via the ample thighs) . . . if he falls, then bang goes the lot, and it's the Tax and the RCs that share the Trundel-Jones bequest. . . . And Jason, seeing everything perfectly clearly, lowers his voice, and recalling the kindness in Merle's face, knows he can do no more than put himself unreservedly in this young woman's hands: 'Just think of my position . . . the torment.'

'You don't understand.'

'It's like keeping someone awake night after night with an angled table lamp.'

'You are Jason, aren't you?'

'It soon induces madness.'

'Miss Trundel-Jones' great-nephew?'

Jason closes his hand on the mouthpiece, turns his back on his relatives and hunches his shoulders: 'When he told you ...'

'Who?'

'Judge Jeffreys.'

'Is that Lower Brandy seven two?'

'The black beetle man with the brief-case . . . when he told you of my predicament, did he also say that it was *his* instructions I keep away from w.o.m.e.n.?'

If it were not for the length of wire between them, Merle would be growing alarmed: 'W.o.m.e.n.?'

At this point Jason sees that the floor and ceiling are closing so rapidly that provided he can avoid speaking for the next thirty seconds all will be over. But, of course, Merle cannot see the crumbling of Lower Brandy Manor: ' . . . and what predicament?'

'Have you no heart . . . hounding, hounding, hounding?'

If Jason thought his problems clear and precise, bounded by finite lines like a tennis court, he now knows they are nothing of the sort, for when he mutters the word 'predicament', Donna shifts most uneasily in her chair, and her tongue makes quick darting movements over her lips.

'Whether you come and see me or not will make no difference . . . my mind is made up.'

And he replaces the phone with the sort of gesture that cannot possibly go without comment, so that after several minutes of silence, during which Uncle Felix watches him over the top of the *Financial Times* and Donna over her tightly folded hands, he is forced to say: 'The check of it, always someone trying to sell you something.'

To which Donna asks laconically: 'What?'

'Jewellery.'

Jason is pleased with the rapidity of his answer, entirely prompted by looking at Donna's hands, but Donna's ancestors were not camel trackers for nothing and her

father's persistence in the face of blinding sandstorms and putrescent dried wells is famous from the Atlas Mountains to the Caspian Sea: 'What have predicaments and Judge Jeffreys to do with jewellery, and how do the 'roads of Afghanistan' and 'w.o.m.e.n.' enter the problem?'

Although Uncle Felix would dearly love to know the answer to these questions, and later hopes to find them out on his own, he considers that for the present the matter has gone far enough. To allow Donna to continue her interrogation might well create an awkward precedent. Also, although Donna is his wife, Jason has the blood of the Trundel-Joneses, and when things come to this sort of crunch, with the Trundel-Joneses, it's the blood that counts. He therefore coughs loudly, shuffles the pages of the *Financial Times* and says with all the authority of his seven directorships: 'Jason must be tired, he's had a difficult and moving day.'

And everything would have been fine had not Caroline chosen this moment to phone: 'Darling!'

'Darling!' (Spoken instinctively by Jason and therefore unfortunately unmuted.)

'Traced you ...'

'Ha ... ha ...' (This is not the 'ha ... ha' of true uninhibited laughter, but rather the feeble self-conscious utterance of one at the bottom of the well after the rope has frayed.)

'You thought I wouldn't?'

'Good heavens, no!'

'And what about the funeral you were supposed to be going to?'

'I was there.'

'When?'

'I left early.'

'Well, now it's all over can you come back.'

'Not a chance, darling, there's all the cleaning up ... stonemasons ... will ... probate.'

'Listen, darling ...'

'Yes.'

'If you don't come soon, it may be too late. There are others, you know.'

Jason looks wildly about the room. Donna has given up all pretence, her eyes are white and the skin on her knuckles white. If the earlier call with Merle had been upsetting, this one is indecent. Uncle Felix too, although he appears deep in the Commodity Prices, betrays his anxieties by the way he moves his ears. Jason puts his hand tight round the mouthpiece: 'I can't talk now.'

'Why not?'

Jason's voice is a deep hush: 'We're holding a service.'

'Another!'

'A memorial service . . . in our private chapel.'

This is quite a new barrier to Caroline. Although on several occasions she has paraded around Grosvenor Square shouting obscenities at the US Embassy and jostling with the police, something she very much enjoyed, particularly when a burly bobby caught her right beneath her queen-sized bra, and dragged her backwards fifty yards down a side street, battling with religion, the Church, and even God, is something quite new and awe-inspiring. Thus, much to Jason's surprise, she also drops her voice, just as Jason himself is humming what he very much hopes will pass as a distant congregation running through the final verse of 'Abide with Me'.

'When will you be able to talk?'

'Tomorrow.'

'I might come down.'

'Devilish place.'

'Why?'

'Haunted . . . under the walnut tree where the Lady Jane Trundel cremated the twins.'

'Christ!'

Silence while Caroline thinks.

'It must be hell.'

'It is.'

'Miss me?'

'I'll say.'

'How are you managing without *it* ?'

'Shhhh !'

'The deepest, warmest, friendliest, cosiest one . . . remember? In fact the only one, the only true one . . . the one that could start a new Crusade . . . the one you'd come down from the Pole for if it as much as wagged its lips . . . remember the button, the dear little button? . . . just pout that and even if I was having a bath in Franz Joseph Land I'd drop everything to be there . . . the one Rodin ought to have seen.'

'For Christ's sake, wait till after the Blessing !'

Donna groans as she pierces her finger with a needle. Caroline maintains the pressure : 'Still, I'll see if I can come down.'

Jason putting on all the dampers : 'Not if you want a good night's sleep . . . clank, clank and all the old door hinges . . . never stops.'

But Caroline, not wishing to hear any more, has already hung up.

Four

THE MARE, like so many men, has never grown up. Capable one moment of grappling with quite crudite matters, when his use of words suggests his present employment is far too menial, and that he should be in Uncle Felix's shoes, he is able completely to shatter the illusion by pressing his coarse red nose to the dirty garage window and with it trace a remarkably good likeness of either the male or female organ. The choice of drawing normally depending on the mood of the day. So far as Jason can remember, the Mare of today is exactly the same as the Mare of sixteen years ago, except that now he has fewer teeth and those he has are a deeper brown. Knowing that to the Mare he is still a child in short grey trousers, Jason takes considerable precautions to ensure that they meet as seldom as possible, and that when they do, either Uncle Felix or Donna is present. Unfortunately such good luck and skilful management cannot last for ever, and on his third day at Lower Brandy, while he is idly gazing at the swimming pool and wondering whether to change into his bathing trunks, a bronchial up-draught behind his ear tells Jason he is caught.

'A lovely day, Mr Jason . . . quite like old times . . . eh?'

This is exactly the way Jason feared the conversation might go. In particular, the manner in which the Mare says 'eh?' is full of old cobbles and horse-droppings, and when the Mare gets down to such earthy subjects as 'old times' the graffiti are going to be thick on the white-washed stable walls.

'Nothing is as it was, Mare.'

'True, Mr Jason, true . . .'

Then the upwards twist of the chauffeur/footman's

pale grey eyes under their large overhanging eyebrows, and the long pause while the little man rocks to and fro, and nothing but the sly glint gives any indication that his brain is still working. But, of course, with the Mare, when his mind appears at its dullest, it is merely recharging.

'Found one of *those* little books the other day, Mr Jason.'

It is the '*those*' that confirms to Jason his need to move back into the safety of the house, but the Mare is not easily beaten :

' . . . and one of them old pictures, mouldy as it was, put me right in mind of 'er.'

'Her!'

'The one yesterday, the girl.'

Jason slowly opens his cigarette case, for the Mare's grey eyes are very ominous.

'Shiny as a *ripe* blackberry in that dress.'

'Go . . . or.'

'And the other one . . . nice girls.'

All Jason's alarm bells ring : 'You actually spoke to them?'

The Mare spits.

'While you were working with that shovel.'

Jason pulls himself together.

'Remember, things aren't always what they seem, and it's the same with those young women . . . You know, of course, why they were there together?'

The Mare shakes his head; Jason lowers his voice :

'So one can act as witness . . .'

'Witness!'

'The one with the auburn hair is the sergeant'

'You're pulling my leg.'

Jason gives a solemn little nod that he hopes will be both convincing and final : 'Take my advice, keep well away . . . there's more things in heaven and earth . . . remember!'

The Mare chokes on his wet cigarette : 'So that's why you went to all that trouble with the 'ole.'

Jason, with his finger on his lips : 'Mum's the word where the police are concerned.'

‘I’ll say, Mr Jason.’

Jason lays his hand on the Marc’s back, just below the greasy collar, and slowly pats.

Donna on her knees arranging a riot of ebullient blooms is exactly the sight that would have sent an overladen, waterless caravan trotting non-stop between Lake Chad and the Libyan coast; or brought Richard Cœur de Lion to the Acre shore on a surfboard. Thus although Jason is passing through the hall in the spirit of nephewly love, trying hard to fix his thoughts, like those of his uncle, securely on matters of business, when he looks down and sees this body, every twist redolent of femininity, he instantly forgets not only balance sheets but Mr Sydney Lom, Caroline and Merle. At first he is set pondering on all those strange inconceivable things that have puzzled him since childhood, like Infinity, Faith and Quantum. But these are mere mental stepping stones. Recently, life for Jason has been full of surprises, but nothing has been quite so surprising as the fact, confirmed by the silver framed wedding photo on Uncle Felix’s desk, that his staid uncle is married to an Arab of unsurpassed beauty nearly twenty-five years his junior. That this would be the hopeless desire of millions of virile males, were they to know Donna, is always in the forefront of his mind. But sharing this first place is the knowledge that Donna is not only his aunt by marriage but also the property of his uncle, along with Lower Brandy Manor and Trundel International. It is of little consolation that unless Donna has issue, Lower Brandy and many of the other tangible assets could possibly be his, for, unlike the Manor, the present star of it, Donna, will not appreciate with time. Thus, when he sees those dark brown eyes peering up at him over the pale brown shoulder where the horizontal flesh reflects the light, destroying in one small place the warmth and colour of the olive skin, and when he remembers that this Oriental nymph and his uncle have separate and well-divided beds,

something he was unable to believe on first sighting through the half-open bedroom door, and later had to confirm by touch, he not only remembers the thin crust of the camel dung, but is finally aware that this woman is bored, and that bored could be dangerous. So when Donna rises, shakes down her dress with long languorous sighs and walks out through the French windows, turning once to look back at Jason before heading for the small but thick clump of evergreens that surround the summer house, Jason deliberately stays where he is.

Far back on her mother's side, Hamdonna is a Begherreh, and the overwhelming joy of the Begherreh women is following their men into battle and destroying the pride and masculinity of their enemies by plucking away their genitals, and, of course, the greater and more imposing the organ, the greater the delight to the Begherreh and the greater the fall of the conquered male. Although Donna is quite unconscious of this genital love-hate relationship, her education having begun in a Christian convent and completed on the banks of the Cam, the tribal urge is still there and when she turns her elegant back on Jason and walks out through the French windows she is avenging herself in the grand old manner, believing the sharp finish to their confrontation to be no less hurtful than an upwards flick with a recently ground scimitar. What she does not know is that, as she walks across the grass, growing ever smaller to Jason still idling in the hall, that young man, now hearing the distant tinkling voice of Mr Sydney Lom, is breathing a sigh of relief.

Jason is quite aware that the only way to complete salvation is to so fill his mind with matters of importance that never again, and certainly not till he is well on the 'milk and honey' run, will Donna or anyone like her be even remotely in his thoughts. And what more perfect, stolid subjects to absorb his whole being than marriage and

business. The one to please the Shade of Great-Aunt Bessie as she peers from her celestial junkshop, the other to please his Uncle Felix. As for putting Donna out of his mind, that should not be too difficult if Uncle Felix can do it sharing the same room. But the hope he has of starting on either of these tasks immediately is interrupted by the screech of brakes, the high revving, then sudden cut-out of an engine, the bang of a car door, and there is Merle, still in her shiny black dress, leaping from a blood-red coupé with a picture swathed in rags. Wisdom tells Jason to flee, yet, unable to move for the sight, he stays where he is, just within the door, till Merle thrusts the picture into his hands with a loud "There!" as if by her action the Great Pyramid of Cheops had just been completed. Then, as if up to that moment he had been nothing but a hatstand, she suddenly looks straight into his eyes and says, with elements of kindness and tolerance: 'I hope you're better.'

'Better?'

'I take it you've been ill.'

Jason shakes his head in a perfect simulation of idiocy. The girl watches, hesitates, dismay clouds her fine young face, and without taking her eyes off the strange man mouthing beneath the ornate chandelier, she moves sideways along the wall towards the door. At the door she looks wildly over her shoulder, expecting to see maniacal hands descending towards her throat, and shouts: 'I was told to see you got it personally . . . don't bother to thank me . . . I'll send the bill to the estate.'

And with that she runs down the steps and into the car, leaving Jason suddenly aware that nothing, neither provisos, the hints of Mr Sydney Lom nor the words of Caroline, can make him continue such rudeness, and that the common courtesies differentiating men from the animals, and which in spite of his youth he has always tried to cultivate, must be upheld. He therefore hurries to follow her, and is actually on the running board when the blood-red coupé starts to move. Being the property of an art student from a

humble background where every penny counts, Merle's car is neither new nor serviceable, and although to the casual observer the gaily painted body may look reliable it is, in fact, old and rusty. The running board in particular is doubtful and has not been called upon to withstand such momentum for a very long time. Although the supports do not fracture immediately, they are already beyond their tensile limit as Merle frantically tries to accelerate away from this madman whose sudden change after such a long period of withdrawal she can only take as a sign of strong homicidal tendencies. It is at the moment of collapse, the broken metal digging deep into the drive, that Donna, drawn by the noise of Merle's shouts of anxiety and Jason's counter-shouts of placation, appears through the evergreens.

Donna's kindness is of the permafrost variety. While the Marc makes temporary repairs to running board and chassis, she is providing cucumber sandwiches and China tea while listening and watching with twitching nerves that reach their climax when Jason holds out his hand and says to Merle, with supreme innocence: 'How did I know you had something to give me?'

A remark that, while it makes Merle happy, has quite the opposite effect on Donna. She rolls her eyes, as the Begherreh do on these occasions, and lets her mind wander along a number of Middle Eastern paths, past garotting posts and gibbets, slave markets and ant-hills, to the shop marked 'Barber' which is, of course, nothing of the sort. But to Jason, in the middle of his *rapprochement* with Merle, such thoughts are inconceivable. Not only is he discovering that Merle was actually helping his great-aunt document her pictures, but that Merle was his great-aunt's confidante, and that in her last few months the dying woman turned more and more to the young art teacher who came every Monday to muse, catalogue, and make tea. That it should have taken him all this time to understand a perfectly simple plot is almost unbelievable, and it is only now, as he steals sideways glances at the girl, Jason fully realises how justified was the

very poor class of his Cambridge degree. For there is absolutely no doubt that it is Merle, this slim long-haired creature with the dark eyes and shiny dress, that Great-Aunt Bessie had in mind when drawing up her will, and that Merle and Merle alone is the promised 'milk'. His great-aunt's wisdom fills him with wonder and happiness, and, but for Donna's graven looks, he would dance on the sandwiches and pour the contents of the silver teapot over his head in a libation. As it is, to appease Donna, he politely changes the conversation : 'And the picture?'

'She was particularly keen for you to have it?'

'Is it . . . valuable?'

Merle shrugs : 'It needs cleaning . . . she always kept it covered . . . in fact when I found it it was wrapped in newspaper with its face to the wall . . . something to do with your family . . . said she couldn't stand the man, called him the Inventor.'

As Merle puts in the clutch of the blood-red coupé and shouts, 'I'll be coming again to see you about your pictures', and Jason gives his biggest, most friendly wave and answers, 'Do', Donna, standing at the window, flings the small Crown Derby sugar bowl across the room as if it were no more than a sherd from the dung heap.

After a difficult dinner in which Donna refuses to be drawn either by her husband or an over-happy nephew-in-law, and goes straight to her bedroom without even waiting for coffee, Jason takes the painting left by Merle into the sitting room and there, before a completely uninterested uncle, begins unwrapping the rags. Beneath is a portrait of a thick-lipped soldier of remarkably coarse features, wearing the curls and buff jacket of the mid-seventeenth century. Jason draws Uncle Felix's attention with a tap on the knee-cap and the words : 'Ever seen him before?'

Uncle Felix, gripped by an illustrated hardback account of the methods used in calculating the likely yield from

boreholes in the Rhodesian copper belt, and thinking this is just another painting, stares vacantly. This staring continuing till Jason slowly reads from the mouldering back : '... Corporal of Horse, Roger Trundel ...'

Uncle Felix's book falls to the floor. 'It says that?'

'Come and see.'

Uncle Felix also drops to the floor.

'Where did you get it?'

'From Great-Aunt Bessie's collection.'

Uncle Felix looks at Jason, the painting, then infinity; his face takes on the Carter-first-sighting-Tutankhamen-treasure look : 'You realise who it is?'

Jason nods : 'The Inventor . . . Old Roger himself.'

Uncle Felix slowly rises. In his eyes, ancient Celtic fires that have slumbered in recent years are refurbished. He puts his hand on Jason's shoulder, and with a firm, friendly grip, his voice choking with emotion, mutters : 'It's beautiful . . . the most beautiful picture I have ever seen . . . well done, boy, well done . . . the Trundel-Jones blood will always out in the end,' then with a gesture of boundless drama, his finger pointing straight at the Corporal's nose, ' . . . cleaned and reframed it can hang in the place of honour . . . in our London offices.'

When Jason finally goes upstairs, his head swimming in the fumes of Louis Roederer, Crystal, Brut, '61, and his arm round his uncle in a wallow of sentimentality, all rifts between them firmly sealed, he realises that although he should be deliciously happy as one about to inherit a fortune, and take a perfect wife, there are still those embryonic tears. For what good is the Midas touch in a taxationless society when your early crop of wild oats is blighted almost before generation, and you must turn away from even a moderately attractive pair of legs, and were Caroline herself to be waiting upstairs, after one glimpse at her auburn hair he must hold his hands over his eyes at even the familiar sight of her quickly rising bosom.

Five

THROUGHOUT ITS long history, Lower Brandy Manor has had its quota of disasters. The agricultural riots in 1848; the never properly hushed-up activities of Bernie Swingler, the homosexual fire-raiser; the defenestration of R. A. Moody, M.A., and the indictment of 'Bedlam Bess' for espionage, are some of the events remembered in etchings and faded letters, collected by Uncle Felix and hung on the stairs. However, no disaster in the past, not even the waving forest of pitchforks outside the dining room window, could possibly compare with the arrival of Caroline and her grey minivan. Before her arrival Black Wednesday promises to be just another fine day, but once Caroline has beaten on the door, peered through the windows, scratched on the glass, cupped her hands and called to the attics from the lawn, the darkest storm-laden northerlies are passing close to Jason's head as he crouches in the linen cupboard waiting for her energies to wane. With no one else but the Mare in the house, should she take it into her head to throw open the front door and then rampage about the rooms, flinging open the cupboards as she goes, he would be entirely at her mercy. And Caroline has no mercy. But Caroline is nowhere near as confident as she appears. Even while shouting she maintains a sharp look-out for a cassocked priest or clutch of nuns to emerge from what she takes to be the private chapel, but which is in fact Uncle Felix's orangerie, now used to store poultry and game awaiting the Mare's knife. And it is the Mare that emerges, hands and apron covered in blood and feathers. When he sees this creature, her auburn hair streaming in the breeze, her head back as she calls at the closed windows, the Mare knows that Mr

Jason's words are true, and that this woman is undoubtedly a constable. And if there is a single doubt, it is instantly dispelled by Caroline's determined approach and cross-questioning manner even in the face of such evident and recent butchery which the Mare is deliberately displaying, believing such a sight sufficient to strike fear into the best organised police force.

'This is private land.'

'I'm seeking Mr Jason Reeve.'

Seeking, seeking, seeking, the very words give her away.

'Your search warrant?'

Caroline's face falls; the Mare is triumphant: 'That surprised you, eh? . . . I know my rights, you go off and find a magistrate,' and a great wave of the bloody cleaver so that Caroline's hair is showered with feathers, and her abundant courage drains away. (Although this spectre cannot possibly be one of Lady Jane Trundel's babies, others may have suffered and left their mark.)

'There's been a mistake.'

The radius of the agitated cleaver increases: 'I know my rights.'

'I just want to see him.'

'Then slip on the bracelets . . . eh?'

Caroline takes one step backwards, then another, and as she retreats, so the Mare advances. When panic takes complete control, Caroline flees to the safety of her minivan, her feet hardly touching the grass, and the van itself showing its VTOL capabilities by the way it surmounts the lawn and makes a clean break through the rhododendrons. If the Mare has deficiencies, lack of loyalty cannot be included amongst them. Rubbing his hands with warm satisfaction for a job well done, he returns to the wooden bench and the half-drawn fowl.

Unaware of the events that drive Caroline away, but thankful for them nevertheless, Jason crawls from his hiding place with his resolve complete. Safety can only be found in complete immersion. He therefore flees the house to the

very centre of everything, the hub through which Galileo would, had he been Uncle Felix, have placed the Earth's axis. The London headquarters of Trundel International.

Past the commissionaire, non-stop to the ninth floor in the directors' lift, through the hallway with the flowers, black leather chairs and mural, through the plate-glass doors with the etched Trundel symbol . . . a corn dolly with a diagonal line through it . . . past the display of aerial photographs and into the inner office, to the quiet sanctity of Miss Hatter's large teak desk goes a happy, released Jason. He stands looking down at the smooth lap and fine nyloned legs till Miss Hatter turns, looks up and says: 'You have no right here.'

When Jason introduces himself, the whole of Miss Hatter's body melts under the magic of his name and smile. Jason, feeling that in the very kernel of Trundel International he must ask for something worth while, asks for the annual report, and is given the new draft one. On page sixteen he finds the full list of the extensive Trundel empire, and slowly runs his fingers down the subsidiaries: Silentalarms; South Eastern Dentures; Qixevac (Laxatives, the Queen's Award to Industry, 1969), Alchemy Labs, etc., etc. But it is not the subsidiaries that catch his eye, make him cough and stare at those nyloned legs. Nor the legs themselves. It is the Chairman's statement on page five that quickens the pulse and sends him to a chair: 'Miss Hatter . . .'

Miss Hatter raises her head with its upswept hair.

'Why this word of warning?'

'Warning, Mr Jason?'

'The Chairman, my uncle's words?'

Miss Hatter has her chin high, with the line of the nose horizontal. Jason taps the open page: 'His warning about Trundel International.'

'I'm sure Mr Felix knows what he is doing.'

'But, Miss Hatter, I would have thought it was money

for old rope . . . metaphorically speaking.'

Miss Hatter's age would be a suitable problem for any boardroom in Threadneedle Street. The nyloned legs between the desk pedestals that have floated through Jason's vision several times, he now decides are deceptive. In fact they are Miss Hatter's personal decoy, for with the light falling unmolested on Miss Hatter's skin and the whites of her eyes, it is quite evident to Jason that the legs of the Chairman's private secretary have kept far better than any other part of her visible body, with the possible exception of her ear lobes, which are extraordinarily large, perfectly formed and stand free from beneath fine black hair as if they themselves were the ear-rings. In spite of these fleshly appendages, Miss Hatter has appeal, even to one so much younger. This appeal stems from her height, bearing, deep blue eyes and the coolness of her approach to every problem. Even now, questioned on broad economic matters, her professionalism remains: 'Mr Jason, all business is highly competitive. If one were not to stay on one's toes, where would one be?'

'Where indeed, Miss Hatter . . . but in this case . . .'

'Business is business, Mr Jason.'

'But this is a very particular business, Miss Hatter. I should not have expected the squeeze, the balance of payments, the lack of import credit facilities, the strike at the London docks, the derailment of the Night Scot or even the Government to have had much effect on it. It's rather like an undertaker's business, Miss Hatter . . . steady.'

Miss Hatter sniffs: 'I think, Mr Jason, you should talk to your uncle about it.'

'I will, Miss Hatter.'

Jason politely replaces the report and makes for the door. His grasp on the handle is firm when Miss Hatter picks up the booklet, still warm from Jason's hand, flips to the significant budget sheet and has the last word: 'Whatever your theories may be, Mr Jason, there's quite a definite falling off . . . you can see for yourself.'

Six

BACK TO Lower Brandy, hoping that Caroline is not on patrol and itching to ask his uncle what devastating event has befallen mankind that they can afford to ignore Trundel's products in this permissive age. Is it something akin to the sudden widespread disappearance of the dinosaurs? Or are there others like himself; has the whole of the legal profession suddenly gone mad? These, then, are the thoughts teeming within Jason's brain as he makes his way from sitting room to study, only to discover that Uncle Felix, ill and depressed all day, showing an exceedingly short temper and taking heavily to the brandy, has on Donna's suggestion been driven to his club by the Mare.

For Donna, the past few days are the first she can remember to have given her such sweet pain and sad pleasure since that all too short railway journey in the couchette with the Turkish magistrate. But now, whichever way she looks, the pain grows stronger and sadder and the pleasure more and more muted, for with the telephone conversations and the arrival of Merle, Donna sees nothing but acres of wall all covered in writing. And the writing is all of one sort: it contains nothing but 'Halt' and 'Give way' signs and reminds Donna that if she is to be the one to overcome the natural inhibitions of an Englishman and liberate the feelings she knows to be there, her actions must be immediate. Her visit to the hairdresser, her husband's departure for his club and Jason's own cheerful return, all point to only one thing. The jinns are on her side and the matter can be delayed no longer. It is an excited and ravishing Donna, her thoughts full of earlier, pre-Felix days, that sets the seduction ball rolling by going under the shower when she knows that

Jason is in his room and must sooner or later come out, particularly with dinner not so far away and Jason always one to enjoy his martini.

The bathroom attached to the master bedroom at Lower Brandy has two doors, one, as might be expected, leading straight from the bedroom itself, the other on to the landing. In all the time Donna has lived at Lower Brandy this door on to the landing had always been kept shut, and many doubt whether, in view of the thick layers of paint and the generations of steam on the metal hinges, it might ever be opened. But this afternoon, while the sun slants through the large netted windows and on to the mosaic shelf into which the basin is set, Donna wrestles with the door, demoniacal energy twisting mouth and face into the most unloving grimaces, till at the very moment she concedes defeat the door flies open. And from this door to the semi-opaque screen of the shower closet there is an uninterrupted view.

It is a shrill, operatic Donna that Jason hears as he treads the thick Wilton on the landing, and having been in the house only a few days he assumes the bathroom has a faulty lock. When level with the door, drawn by the singing, he not unnaturally gives a quick glance, the head movement associated with uncertainty but hope. And this hope is completely fulfilled, for a thoughtful Donna has ensured that the semi-opaque shower curtain shall only be partly drawn, with the part that obscures least from the door, open. Donna's back with the water cascading over it is a sight few may imagine and fewer experience. Her hair swept upwards and under a bath-cap emphasizes the slinness of her neck and contrasts most pleasantly with the two large convex sweeps of her shoulders and thighs, and the sensuous droop of her twin buttocks. And, of course, it is on these buttocks that the water collects and from which it flows most copiously, acting, when seen from Jason's location, very much as a lense, enlarging already sufficient contours.

Beautiful though this back view is, Jason prays for move-

ment. But Donna is tackling the whole exercise like a professional, especially the timing, and while Jason is watching her, she is watching him. A small driving mirror, almost completely covered with steam, except for one area wiped dry by her finger, is fixed to the closet wall and focused on the door. Donna's tactics on this occasion are not unlike those of Harold at Hastings—to hold her ground to the last possible moment, and then at the crisis point, when her adversary is in the throes of total frustration and exhaustion, drive home the advantage. That Harold lost has not occurred to her, for not being British by birth, she finds Harold, William, Cromwell and Charles I all completely interchangeable. Thus, when Donna feels that Jason has stood there quite long enough to complete his survey, and that the familiarity of the ground may soon make him lose interest, she turns, her arms held above her head, the side of her right breast slowly breaking the outline. When Jason is treated to this exciting metamorphosis of plan to profile, he so forgets his relationship with the woman under the shower that he actually takes a single step on to the fine polished marble of the bathroom, something that Donna does not fail to notice through her own simple monitor. Not till she feels that the whole picture is indelibly burned on Jason's mind does she raise her eyes and, pretending deep shock, suddenly notices the open-mouthed young man in the doorway. With a quick movement that makes Jason jump, she seizes the carpet-sized bath towel and hurriedly drapes herself, at the same time giving coy downward glances at her own beautiful olive body, glances that are intended to and do act as reminders to the forward-leaning, wondering, Jason. This dance of the long yashmaks is the last Jason sees of Donna before moving quickly towards the stairs, but as he takes his first hurried step downwards, there comes the suddenly remembered shriek, tardy and half-hearted and carrying none of the affront that might have been expected.

Supper is quiet and restrained. Jason, who immediately

he leaves the landing remembers Mr Sydney Lom in all his awesome detail, resolves to play the whole matter down, at all costs to avoid catching Donna's eye and to ensure that their evening meal together is as cold as if they were breakfasting on the higher slopes of Everest. But with only the two of them present and Uncle Felix's absence so evident it is difficult not to comment on it, any hopes he has of keeping Donna to a quiet discussion on the forthcoming sale of French Animalier Bronzes is doomed from the departure of the whitebait. Donna first expresses her surprise on how much a good fitted carpet with a thick underfelt deadens footfalls, and that in her own home there was always the warning 'pad, pad' of sandals as feet crossed from rug to tiles and back again, and then goes on to point out that anyway the noise of the shower itself was considerable, and reminded her of the day a friend of her father took her to see the Niagara Falls and she, hearing nothing he said for the roar of the water, was quite unprepared for the dexterity of his hands and how dangerous that was with all that water so close. Jason nods with deep understanding, but keeps his eyes firmly fixed on the cruet, and quietly prays that Uncle Felix is already on his way home. After half an hour with the coffee during which Donna slides her legs along the carpet in slow, tantalising, skating movements, eases off her slippers, then curls sideways on the couch with her dark hair across the glossy leather, his aunt does her languid parade to the door, only this time, there being no one but Jason to watch, it is performed with superb precision, no nuance or touch of ancient Arab mime forgotten. At the door she turns just long enough to say :

'You can bring up my nightcap in twenty minutes.'

Jason is a man of rapidly growing experience and he knows that to comply with his aunt's request will do no good to anyone, merely bringing sadness and frustration to both of them. There are only two courses open, either not to take the final double Scotch and soda up the stairs at all and suffer the fury of this thwarted woman, which,

whenever he thinks of Uncle Felix, he can perfectly well understand; or to carry up the nightcap but ensure that he himself is protected. But protection against a Begherreh woman is not easy, for so violent are their feelings that they have been known to scratch their way through a quarter of an inch of reinforced leather within a minute. And the look on his aunt's face and the manner of her movements across the room have convinced him that he is going to need far more than boiled leather. The most satisfactory cover would undoubtedly be Uncle Felix's suit of Milanese armour at the bottom of the stairs, but that was made for a man of five feet six, whereas Jason is over six feet. The only other form of protection is spiritual, the acquisition of some personal sanctuary, perhaps a meritorious book or ikon acting as a talisman. He already knows there is no ikon about the house, but there are a few books, particularly on the two shelves in the rather badly lit corner beyond the rows of finely bound copies of *The Money Box*.

It is a cautious Jason who, with strong contradictory emotions and an old school copy of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* playing the part of an erudite cod-piece, moves slowly up the stairs trying hard not to spill two well-filled glasses. Although he goes forward with a degree of trepidation, Jason has absolutely no intention of letting events get out of hand, and for that reason the faint, though recognisable, memory of Mr Sydney Lom that accompanies him at every tread is welcome. Being now such a man of the world, someone so inured to surprise that he no longer considers it to exist, Jason knows exactly what he will find when he throws open the door and looks across the fine white Chinese carpet to the satin-draped bed, feminine and theatrical. There, lying on her side on the golden eiderdown, with her rump and shoulders heaving Paradisewards and accentuating the shadows of her waist, will be a naked or near-naked Donna, one absolutely smooth arm bent across her breast, the other, fingers pointing, resting provocatively on the bed. And, knowing this, he is prepared for it. In

fact so confident is Jason of all he will see, and of how little it will affect him, that as he puts his hand on the door he actually gives a little whistle, not of expectation or excitement, but rather of a deep inner confidence, such as Moses might have given when sandwiched between the shores of the Dead Sea and the pounding hooves of Pharaoh's chariots. Imagine Jason's shock, therefore, at finding Donna wrapped from head to feet in a British Army greatcoat, sitting on a stool by the dressing table. If a few seconds ago Jason had thought surprise impossible, now he knows, when he looks at the marks where a major's crown once graced each epaulette, that life has many more things in store for him. Donna, on the other hand, is completely composed. She lifts her head, takes the glass and smiles: 'Do I look English?'

This question, patently not answerable in the affirmative, sets Jason rocking on the balls of his feet. The mixture before him is unmistakable. A naked Arab woman, with a beautiful neck and shapely ankles, sits shrouded inside his uncle's old army greatcoat. But being polite, considerate and well brought up, he simply says: 'Completely.'

Donna is pleased, believing this one more step along her path to local integration: 'I thought it suited me.'

'It does.'

And this reply is genuine, for as long as Donna feels compelled to stay within this relic life for Jason should not be difficult. But, of course, Donna has absolutely no intention of staying wrapped like this for ever. The idea of the greatcoat is simply to break any ice that might have been forming over Jason since the view from the landing, by giving him something typically British, and so setting all his apprehensions at rest. However, it has not occurred to her that to dress in Uncle Felix's greatcoat, typically British though it might be, is bound to replenish all those latent pools of guilt that would haunt any man in his uncle's bedroom, particularly with his aunt playing the sort of game that Donna is at the moment merely warming up for. Jason

therefore feels that some slight damper is needed, and adds :
'But . . .'

'But what ?'

'I would much rather see you in something of your own.'

This is not strictly true, for wrapped in this layer of khaki, her two red lips the only flashes of colour, Donna looks utterly different from anything or anyone Jason has ever seen. In fact, were it any other time and were the coat anyone else's, Jason would have thrown his arms around her and poured loving invectives inside the collar and down as far as he was able, certainly as far as the belt and perhaps even to where the old water bottle would have hung. But it being Uncle Felix's coat, and with his own conscience now in a turmoil, and with of course Mr Sydney Lom never far from his thoughts, Jason can merely say : 'Something full and flowing.'

'You would ?'

'Of course.'

Donna is amazed at her mistake, but rises graciously from her stool, opens the top button of the greatcoat, showing the extent of the very fine throat as well as the rather undefined area below : 'All right, what else ?'

Jason shrugs : 'Whatever you like.'

'Not pantaloons.'

Jason seizes upon this passing lifebelt :

'Why ever not ?'

'No.'

'They'd suit you beautifully.'

'How do you know ?'

'I can imagine.'

Donna is suddenly very doubtful. Jason, with much on his mind, considers this the moment to lay some of his cards on the table : 'I think it's time you and I had a little talk.'

He means this in the kindest way, and has only spoken in the hope that such a philosophy expressed now rather than later will cement the goodwill between them, making the rest of his stay at Lower Brandy even more pleasant

and without any of the strains that Donna's behaviour is creating. But all Donna can see when she hears these words is Merle's face and the shiny black dress. Knowing that something is stirring within his aunt, but unsure of exactly what is it, Jason resolves to illustrate his goodwill by squatting down beside her, quite unappreciative that such an action, with its Oriental undertones, merely increases her anxieties so that she can only thrust out her fingers with the nails paramount and scratch the side of his face, driving Jason backwards till he overbalances and falls full length on the white Chinese carpet. But Donna is a woman whose moods change faster than the shifting sands, and the moment she sees Jason lying helpless on his back, all her Begherreh fire dies away and it is as if she were suddenly to receive a complete transfusion of Quaker blood. As Jason climbs back on to his haunches and says: 'You didn't have to do that,' she clasps him to her arms and dabs his cheek with her own heavily scented handkerchief.

But Donna is by nature impatient: 'It's getting heavy.'

'What?'

'The coat.'

Jason knows quite well that Donna is hoping he will either say 'Take it off' or offer to do so himself. But Jason has every intention of being non-committal.

'It's meant for a man.'

'The buttons.'

Donna fingers the shiny embossed emblem of Uncle Felix's regiment.

'What's wrong with them?'

'They're so . . . big.'

Jason glances towards the door:

'I ought to be going.'

Donna ignores this statement:

'When I was under the shower, you stopped.'

'You might have been in trouble.'

'I was singing.'

'People have been known to sing in the most critical situations . . . the early Christian Martyrs . . . the English at Bannockburn . . . even the Germans in 1918.'

But Donna has had enough. As Jason swallows and takes a pace backwards, Donna springs. Like a praying mantis she sweeps him into his uncle's greatcoat in one clean enveloping movement.

The moment he comes to the surface, Jason takes a deep breath, sits upright on the golden eiderdown, and cries 'No . . .'

This long wail, like the cry from the minaret, holds Donna spellbound; she believing him struck by severe cramp or appendicitis: 'My poor, poor lamb.'

Now although Jason is obviously no Freemason, being closer to the Hippies and having no great feeling for Super-being, Queen or Country, and at heart a feminist who would do nothing to further the present insidious masculine domination by joining any all-male-hoodoo group; nevertheless, he is not totally insensitive. Having been brought up in the waft of Christianity, albeit in the spicy winds of calypso and spiritual, he is quite aware that amongst the guide-lines his uncle most cherishes are the City and Stock Exchange, the Senior Infantry Club, the Lower Brandy Branch of the British Legion and the Betty Martin Lodge. In the space between the two beds is Uncle Felix's small bedside table, and it is upon this that his most precious books lie. One is the Bible, and the other Morton and Goulding's *The Happy Investor*. When, after his wail of distress, Jason sees both these volumes within a few inches of his face, with his anguish at a peak, he wrenches one arm free and points wildly at the table-top: 'Cover them!'

'My poor, poor, lamb.'

'Thou shalt not sleep with thy maidservant, nor thine ass, not thine uncle's wife . . . it's all there in the Volume of Sacred Law . . . right above *The Happy Investor*!'

'My poor, poor, poor lamb.'

‘For God’s sake!’

And to show the extent of his agonising guilt, Jason flings his hand across his eyes so that Donna releases him, much as a thrush thrusts away a snail before cracking the shell. Then she slides from the bed, searches quickly about the room for some suitable cover, and in the end places her own delicate black pants over the offending volume. Naturally, being basically a decent man, brought up in the English public-school tradition, this evokes from Jason a fine representation of a death groan: ‘No!’

‘No?’

‘Of course not.’

‘Why not?’

‘It’s indecent.’

Jason points; Donna shrugs: ‘It was your idea.’

‘Something else . . . a towel, a curtain, a pram cover, even a nightdress, but not that!’

Such sentimentality makes Donna laugh, but feeling that she must show her desire to co-operate, she removes the undergarment and replaces it with one of Uncle Felix’s dress shirts. It is not till every trace of the gilt lettering on both bindings have disappeared that Jason can allow himself the luxury of normal breathing. But he still has Donna: ‘That’s it.’

Donna is surprised: ‘How can it possibly be *it*?’

Jason nods: ‘It has to be.’

Donna is annoyed: ‘What do you mean, has to be.’

‘Ending . . . finale . . . curtains . . . you must take my word for it.’

‘Your word! What have words to do with *it*? Kismet . . . you cannot escape destiny, even now it is wrapping itself around you like a heavenly blanket.’

This is nonsense, for the only thing that is wrapping itself round Jason at this moment is Donna herself.

‘Even destiny can’t help this time. This is the law . . . the divine, matriarchal law . . . the law of the departed. Another rules my life, from the grave.’

Donna lets out a piercing Oriental cry: 'You filthy pervert . . . you practise spectrophilia . . . sex after death, spirits in the night. You're like those poor nuns where nothing can alleviate their desires but the ice-cool tool of a Jinn.'

Seeing her shock, Jason laughs and tightens his arm: 'Christ no . . . it's flesh and blood for me.'

No words could go quicker to Donna's heart. All her doubts vanish and all her enthusiasms return: 'Wonderful . . . no one can avoid the ordained.'

Realising that however much he may wish to stay, he is rapidly passing the red signal with no reverse gear, Jason deliberately enacts a long yawn:

'Time I went . . . no time like the present for going.'

Donna is deeply affronted and points at the draped literature: 'After all I've done . . . and you call yourself a gentleman . . . an English gentleman . . . you would just walk out and leave me?'

These last words uttered with all the guile and meaning that someone with Donna's ability can possibly muster, and spoken with the head raised in that sad expressive manner, are too much for even such a resolute heart as Jason's. His wilting is far too obvious.

'That's better.'

Donna's hand on his forehead.

'The buttons.'

'Not again.'

'Look!'

And she peeling the buttons open one by one. Jason watching the first two buttons undo then throwing his arms across his face.

'Frightened?'

'Of course not.'

'Then look.'

'I can't.'

Donna seizing his arm:

'I tell you to bloody well look.'

'I can't.'

'Good God! Is there something wrong with me?'

Jason worried, shaking his head, trying to place a little sanity into a situation that is now far out of hand, turns to flattery. And even in his predicament this is not difficult with Donna lying there, arms akimbo and Uncle Felix's greatcoat parting where, in the days of the cavalry, the horse would have placed its neck: 'You are as beautiful as the Yellow Mountain Saxifrage, as pure as a young Benedictine, you have the line of a Saxon apse, and the silver chalice that is your body ...'

'Then look!'

Jason, although he has his hand tight across his face and is screwing up his eyes with the eyebrows and forehead well puckered, is of course squinting through the very narrow aperture between middle and forefinger: *'I am not allowed to ...'*

'Who's stopping you?'

'The dead!'

And then the quick flashing movement, the fingers out, the wrist hard, the movement perfected during those years of evolution in crawling from primeval oasis to sheepskin tent. And, of course, there is John Bunyan's masterpiece, complete with ink blots and Uncle Felix's earliest portrayals of the £, spinning across the room to end up minus its cover against the wardrobe. A stunned Donna is still turning the pages, then looking up at Jason's gaping, ripped trousers to say, 'Why . . . why . . . why?', and a shaken Jason is saying, 'It's well worth reading,' when on the ceiling and the wallpaper above the Louis XVI mirror is the growing pool of light indicating that Uncle Felix and the Mare are already in the drive.

Caroline's call is late.

'Darling!'

'Darling!'

'You sound out of breath.'

'Fire practice . . . up and down the ladders and along the balustrade.'

'At midnight?'

'That's when most fires occur.'

Pause.

'I called.'

'How marvellous.'

'Wherever were you?'

'What time?'

'Elevenish.'

'What rotten luck, we just crossed.'

'What's on?'

'Now?'

'Yes, now.'

'Bed.'

'Alone?'

'Darling, this is a respectable house.'

'What about Auntie?'

'I told you, she's dead.'

'The other one.'

'You should see her.'

'I have.'

Jason bites his tongue.

'You sound worried, poor diddums.'

'Where did you see Aunt Donna?'

'*Aunt Donna . . .*' the harsh, dry, Caroline you-rotten-dirty-swine laugh, '*. . . there's a picture of her in Today's Dame, opening a bazaar.*'

'My God . . . you of all people should know what photos can do.'

'Not that much, diddums . . . not all the touching up in the world . . . those breasts . . . and God! The way that stomach comes out and then goes in, I bet that sends you. . . . I know just what stomachs and pudenda can do to you.'

'She's nothing like that . . . she's . . .'

'Just an old handbag.'

'Exactly.'

'Listen . . . cruuunch . . . cruuuuunch . . . theeep . . . theeep . . . theeewp . . . tweeep.'

'What the hell?'

'That's me pulling the communication cord . . . making sure that *she doesn't get it and nor do you . . . that's me biting it off! All six inches of it!*'

'Christ!'

'And spitting it into the Fleet.'

'The what?'

'The Fleet drain . . . the sewer.'

Jason had forgotten that Caroline was born within the sound of Bow Bells.

Buzz, buzz . . . buzz, buzz . . .

'Darling. I've been thinking, suppose it was dry?'

'What?'

'The Fleet drain . . . suppose it just fell there and lay . . . lay till the rains came?'

'Good God! What a mind.'

'Lay on its own with all the rubbish . . . and we haven't even given it a name or a number like 707, so we couldn't go down and call it, and we'd never know which manhole cover to raise . . . makes me almost cry at the thought of it . . . it should have a bell round it first . . .'

'First!'

'Before the cruuunch . . . cruuuuunch . . . theeep . . . theeep . . . theeewp . . . tweeep!'

'For God's sake, *this is a manual exchange.*'

Buzz, buzz . . . buzz, buzz . . .

'Darling!'

'Darling!'

'Where the hell were you, and why didn't you protect me from that bloody little Dervisher?'

‘Dervisher?’

‘The imbecile with the chopper and feathers.’

‘He’s a warlock, Uncle keeps him instead of a dog.’

‘God ! What a place.’

‘You can’t be too careful in the country.’

Seven

IF THE Mare were ever to be asked to draft his own entry for *Who's Who*, under hobbies he would place 'driving, gardening and waiting at table', and under profession 'erotist'. Not that he is at all rigid in this matter, a more interchangeable person would be difficult to find, for the Mare can spot eroticism inside the bonnet of a car as easily as he can anywhere in nature. The male and female joint, the nut and bolt, and even the humble exhaust pipe, exert almost as powerful an impact on his mind as any of the pictures on the walls above the neatly laid-out tool-kit on the old oak bench. It is not surprising, therefore, that it is from the Mare that Jason gets the first distant glimpse of what his sixth sense tells him might well be the seeds of a potential Lom-nullifier. For on the same bench on which the Mare keeps his tools, tobacco tin and old army respirator, he also keeps his main store of the more erotic literature that the formidable Mrs Mare will not let into their little self-contained flat above the stables; should she find any there, it is immediately ejected through the sloping skylight of the bathroom, irrespective of weather. (Mrs Mare deliberately chose the bathroom skylight on the very first occasion, for anything ejected from there ensures that the Mare, if he is to recover the article, must brave not only the face-high nettles that grow directly below, but the old cess-pit.) It is on this work bench and amongst this literature that a torn piece of paper, fly-blown and damp, with faded printing, catches Jason's eye. It is an advertisement for *Pan, the Sylvan Method*. There is no picture, etching or woodcut and absolutely nothing to suggest what nature this 'Sylvan Method' might take, nothing, that is, except six

words in much smaller print : 'Be as natural as the truffle.' Although this method might be almost anything—animal, vegetable or mineral, or even the hoped-for abstract—and although Jason is not normally one to leap blindfold into conclusions, in this case he has that quite unaccountable feeling that this might be just the sort of break he has been hoping for, and that at the end of this enervating tunnel there could be more light than he first thought possible. Unfortunately the address at which this method is to be found has not been torn with the scrap of paper, so quite naturally Jason hunts eagerly through the spreading pile of magazines for the matching piece, like the Prince's messenger with Cinderella's slipper. He is in the midst of this task when the Mare announces himself with his usual long wheeze. And the Mare is, of course, delighted that Jason is once again back in the fold, upholding their erstwhile mutual interests, for on their renewed acquaintanceship the other day the Mare had feared that Jason has grown away from such things. Now he is happy to be proved wrong, and the hideous delight in his face is only matched by the excitement in his voice.

'The best's on the top shelf, Mr Jason.'

Jason, annoyed at being disturbed, fights to stay calm : 'It's a strange world.'

'It is indeed, Mr Jason.'

'But it's always useful to know how the other half live.'

Jason holds up an open page full of advertisements. 'A complete industry . . .'

The Mare coughs and fumbles with his tobacco tin. Jason proffers his own cigarette case : 'I sometimes wonder why we don't diversify our own products more.'

'A good idea, Mr Jason.'

Jason waves the cutting whose parent page he has so far been unable to find : 'Get to know the retailers better.'

'You reckon that's the secret, Mr Jason?'

Jason nods. The Mare is impressed. Jason is playing his

first business role well. Now he waves the torn piece of paper :
'We'll start with them. You find me the address.'

As Jason takes his first tentative steps in this delicate exploration, his uncle, slowly recovering from the trauma of Aunt Bessie's will, the depressing effects of which he has hidden remarkably well, is now finalising his plans. To retain some influence over the very large amount of stock that is to come to his nephew, and with earnest prayers that the situation shall not deteriorate further with the money going to the Tate or RCs, Uncle Felix sees only one possible solution. To keep the assets within the business, he must act in the best medieval tradition by arranging a suitable marriage. Luckily he has the very consort. The long-legged, blonde-haired daughter of his European partner Freda Haushofer, a girl he himself has noted on several occasions and were it not for the very great disparity in age, and the need two years ago to consolidate in the Middle East, this young lady might now be the mistress of Lower Brandy rather than Donna. However, being thorough and systematic, before contacting Herr Haushofer, Uncle Felix traps Jason by the fountain : 'Time you got married.'

Jason now knows there is a conspiracy.

'Nothing like it.'

Considering the separation of the beds and his own recent experience on the golden ciderdown Jason thinks this an odd remark. But his uncle might be alluding to some other aspect of matrimony, so Jason smiles and tries to be evasive. But on these occasions Uncle Felix is a very insensitive bulldog : 'Someone suitable, that's the thing . . . perhaps even foreign.'

Jason grows cold and his legs ache. This is Uncle Felix, knowing of the episode in the greatcoat, his greatcoat, yet remaining very British and keeping a stiff upper lip while laying plans for divorce. Jason explains : 'It was more of a charade . . . play-acting.'

Uncle Felix slaps Jason's back : 'That's no good, you want the real thing.'

Jason's eyes are wide : 'The real thing !'

'Of course, a boy of your age.'

Worried and puzzled, Jason can only mumble his thanks and stare hopefully across the lawn. This uncle of his is truly magnanimous : 'But there's still the will.'

'That's exactly what I'm thinking of.'

Jason now realises that there must be something about Donna he does not know :

'Are you sure . . . it will be all right ?'

'It's a case of keeping it in the family.'

In the circumstances this is one of the strangest expressions Jason has ever heard, but seeing his uncle's beaming face, he too smiles : 'Sounds fine if it's really all right with you.'

'Nothing better. Just like the old days; linking two houses, Queen Victoria and all that . . . and you'll like her, I promise.'

Jason lowers his head as the seemingly thing to do. His uncle's modern outlook is remarkable.

'Well built . . . strong . . .'

Jason bites his lip.

' . . . with fine legs . . .'

Jason's head is now very low.

' . . . blonde . . .'

'Blonde !'

'Of course, all Germans are blonde.'

Jason, bewildered, can only dip his fingers into the cool, clear water of the fountain, place a little on his forehead and ruminate on the strange ways of businessmen, and of Uncle Felix in particular. Whether Donna is in fact a blonde German who dyes her hair he doubts. It is far more likely that Uncle Felix, on behalf of Trundel International, has been investing in one of those pleasant new centrally heated houses of ill-repute reported so common in Hamburg.

But exactly what his uncle has in mind for him he now has no idea.

Uncle Felix is a devout churchman, who when not reading the lesson enjoys nothing better than taking the plate round and listening to the money tinkling and would uphold the sacrament of marriage on any university campus. When the future well-being of Trundel International is at stake he can engineer marriage or divorce as easily as a Hottentot shapes a gourd. Satisfied and happy, he now drives ten miles with his letter to Herr Haushofer to ensure that it catches the evening post.

Eight

MERLE'S VOICE over the phone is as sweet as it was over the cucumber sandwiches: 'We need you.'

Although unsure of the specific requirement, Jason is naturally delighted his wife-designate needs him, and flattered that it is to him that she should turn in her hour of need. Also he feels that such desire now augurs well for the future, particularly with Great-Aunt Bessie's vision of eternity and his uncle's apparent concern: 'Good . . . but who are "we"?'

'All of us, the Liverpool Street Commune . . . don't you read the papers?'

Jason scans the room.

'Last night's evening papers.'

'We don't get them.'

'Listen, we need supplies. . . . I don't know how to put this . . . you'll think it an awful check, but you see . . . your aunt, she was very sympathetic . . . she helped us once and we need friends.'

'What sort of friends?'

'People who believe in our aims.'

'What are your aims.'

'I told you, we're the Liverpool Street Commune . . . we've taken over this empty warehouse. We're setting up a new society . . . here.'

'How much?'

'Don't put it like that; we're each ringing up our rich friends.'

'I'm not rich yet.'

'But you will be.'

'You could also try my uncle.'

'He's a capitalist.'

'So am I.'

Merle takes no notice: 'We could do with fruit, tinned stuff and lavatory paper more than anything . . . you see, we're never coming out . . . we've all sworn to die first.'

And although Merle is normally the gayest of young women and capable of sniffing out a joke anywhere, these last few words are spoken with complete solemnity, a solemnity that in Jason's opinion also emphasises one more link in their mutual bonding.

As Jason replaces the phone, the Marc taps the window while waving a sheet of paper before the glass. Even from this distance, Jason can see the roughly scrawled address.

Nine

STRAIGHT INTO that exclusive Piccadilly store with a jaunty smile, his brief-case (Uncle Felix's present) held high and a well-furled umbrella hard against his left leg, goes Jason. Although at the moment his finances are dangerously low, on the strength of his forthcoming legacy he picks the largest and most succulent hamper before moving to the tinned Scottish soups. There, with a dark-coated salesman in attendance, he increases the collection so rapidly and expensively that even in this shop people turn an admiring eye at one able to ignore the normal practices by neither feeling the goods nor asking their price. The first hint of surprise comes when he adds one hundred and fourteen rolls of coloured lavatory paper and explains that 'they are never coming out'. When he gives the address the salesman is very doubtful, and Jason is forced to spread the morning paper and point to the photograph showing a high yard door covered in slogans, topped with barbed wire and sandwiched between an undertaker's and a dis-used abattoir. The salesman's doubt increases.

'Will they answer the door?'

'Ask for Miss Merle Peacock.'

The salesman stares at Jason for a very long time.

'And is there a message?'

Jason thinks. 'With all the Inventor's love.'

The salesman looks up in admiration: 'Are you the Inventor, sir?'

Jason shakes his head. 'One of my ancestors . . . and now the things are everywhere.' Jason lowers his voice, ' . . . in drawers, hat-boxes and portmanteaus, on tundra and on veldt, on rivers and paddy fields, on the high seas and under

them, trapped in air bubbles within barnacle-encrusted hulls, lying by edelweiss on sunlit Alps and by egrets' feathers on mossy slopes, in cinemas, jumbo jets and armoured cars, in sarcophagi . . . dropped there by archaeologists . . . in strongrooms, in one-star and five-star, on first floor and penthouse, in heavy-duty frostproof packets of three and tropicalised mountain mule packs of eight thousand . . . the long time between deliveries . . . you see, like the Trundel-Joncses, *they're indestructible*.'

The salesman nods and opens the door.

The van from Piccadilly draws up in front of the reporters, and after a few words with the police sergeant, all of which is radioed back to Scotland Yard, the driver emerges with Jason's parcels. Jason himself is on his third vodka and lime, not more than a mile away, and still well within the general E / E.C. area. And the reason Jason is drinking hard so early in the day is not difficult to see, for fifty yards further up the street is the dismal shop that sooner or later he must approach. But so uninviting is this particular shop, and so strange his quest, that after a preliminary reconnaissance Jason has retreated to the Golden Lion, there to acquire enough courage to broach the half-open door. And it is not till his fourth vodka and lime that he feels sufficiently confident to return. The most striking thing about Mr Jo Ferrara's shop, standing isolated, awaiting demolition, is the main window. This is completely covered with brown paper, into which a small aperture, perhaps six inches by three inches, has been cut. It is into this window within a window that Jason now peers. It is evident at once that the proprietor has a very contradictory sense of display, for after making it as difficult as possible to see the goods, anyone under five foot ten needing a stool, he shows nothing but a cane standing in a single, high, patent-leather woman's boot, draped with a blonde wig and surmounting an artificial leg made in France. On a card to the right of the display are the words '*Ils ne passeront pas*', together with a small faded

passport photograph of the Maréchal. Whether this fine surrealist arrangement is the latest in window-dressing, Jason is not sure, but what he *is* sure is that this is the same address that the Mare wrote on the dirty sheet of paper, and which Jason now holds in his palm. Once through the half-open door, Jason is funnelled down a sloping hall, round a left-hand bend and brought to a small hatch in an otherwise blank wall. The hatch is waist high, and, in bending, Jason is suddenly aware that far from being a fool, Mr Jo Ferrara simply wishes to keep his clients fit, and after making them tiptoe past his window and twist down his corridor, is ensuring they can touch their toes before trying on the artificial leg and doing homage to the Maréchal. Within this hatch, in a miniature mock-up of the Black Hole of Calcutta, a young girl sits with her ashtray, cigarettes and feet all supported on an unconnected television set. The girl is bored. Jason hesitates. Although this is just the place for the Mare to spend his summer holidays, Jason himself feels very much in the midst of the Labyrinth. He would prefer to direct his enquiries on Pan, the Sylvan Method to someone just a little older.

‘Have you a father?’

The girl bites her lip: ‘What’s that got to do with you?’

‘Have you?’

‘Bloody check!’

‘A mother then?’

The girl, used to the strangest men peering through the little slit in the brown paper, turning her corner and poking their heads through the hatch, is always on guard. On the floor by her side, hidden by the flap of the hatch, is the chemical fire extinguisher thoughtfully provided by her father. It is towards this her hand now moves.

‘You’re asking for it.’ (Her reluctance to use the apparatus is entirely due to Jason’s youth, good looks and well-fitting suit, things seldom seen from the Black Hole.)

‘Something I saw in an advertisement.’

‘Well? I haven’t all day’ (which is, of course, exactly what

she has) ' . . . and I don't know what your game is, but standing there like that you'll lose us a lot of trade.'

Jason is even more surprised.

'Course you will; people don't like coming up when someone's already standing. People like privacy, that's what we try and offer . . . it's our speciality.'

Jason takes a deep breath.

'I have a grave personal problem . . . a problem that has beset holy men and thinkers alike since the beginning of time. I should like to see Mr Jo Ferrara.'

The girl is impressed. Her grip on the fire extinguisher loosens, and she says something she has been taught never to say : 'E's nipped round the corner.'

Now this is not strictly true, for Mr Jo Ferrara is in fact at Newmarket watching the horses, but it is a tiny tentative step towards the truth.

'When will he be back?'

'Tonight.'

'It must be a very big corner.'

'Look, Mr Funny, in case you're the fuzz, every single thing we stock is of medical, cultural, artistic or antique merit.'

'I assure you, far from being the fuzz, I'm a potential client.'

'Well then?'

She is so relaxed she lights a cigarette.

'Have you a catalogue?'

'Fraid not.'

Jason leans forward and whispers: 'Pan, the Sylvan Method.'

'You'll have to see Dad.'

'Is it not within your jurisdiction?'

The girl takes a deep pull on the cigarette, then detaches a piece of chewing gum from under the hatch: 'Best to see Dad . . . in your case.'

'There are two sorts?'

The girl looks him up and down—that is, all of him that

shows through the hatch—and shrugs. Then footsteps and a cough in the corridor make her look past him into the darkness: 'There's someone waiting, try tomorrow about the same time . . . I'll tell him you came.'

When Jason forces his way through the watching crowd outside the present headquarters of the Liverpool Street Commune, and bangs hard on the high wooden door where the barbed wire froths over the top, he is told to piss, bugger and generally scuttle off. But when he shouts 'Merle Peacock' several times, the door is opened a foot and he is allowed to slide through. Once inside, however, he is subject to the strictest security precautions. A bearded man in an Indian caftan and tall Welsh hat ties a dirty handkerchief round his eyes before leading him up the twisting stairs. In the Presence the handkerchief is dramatically whisked away, and there is Merle, the Cleopatra of this New Society, sitting in an old pulpit beneath a halo of peacock feathers and between two blackboards on which are chalked the rules of conduct for the whole Commune. Lying on the floor neatly stacked as if they are now in the Quartermaster's Store awaiting redistribution are the contents of his hampers.

A cool, happy, fulfilled Merle descends from her throne to take Jason's arm and lead him to the old gantry where the guards sit with fire extinguishers and sacks of water-filled ping-pong balls, watching the fuzz and media men across the road exchanging jeers through the traffic. Jason notes the defences with admiration, particularly the museum man-trap, open and gaping and newly painted, and the sawn-through portion of the landing immediately below the only large window, but interested though he is in this and any other revolt, the subtleties of fortification and the techniques of assault, it is Merle he has come to see. So while the girl is considering the rather ominous implications in the cutting off of their electricity and the rumour that six fire

brigades are to attack simultaneously, Jason looks ostentatiously at his watch. Not only does he wish to remind Merle that their time together is limited; on hearing the news of the fire brigades he loses any desire to stay, for, although a sympathiser, he wishes to limit his support to provisions and not to appear early the following morning at the Old Bailey. He is therefore both surprised and alarmed when his intended looks up and says, quite casually: 'You can share my pad.'

A statement that produces no flicker of interest or emotion on any face but his own.

An evening and a night in an old warehouse with a girl like Merle is not something about which Jason would normally have the slightest qualm, although more congenial surroundings would be welcome. But he would not have expected that either Great-Aunt Bessie or Mr Sydney Lom had this sort of courtship in mind, nor would they view such a dead-pan invitation in the very heart of the Permissive Society with equanimity. With no single pad or even twin-bedded pad in the whole building, to stay might be to place the provisos under too great a strain, yet as any fool can see Merle Peacock is unquestionably Great-Aunt Bessie's choice. Jason only accepts therefore as a matrimonial insurance, hoping the long dark hours of the night will pass peacefully and that he will not suddenly find himself the centre of an interested group of drop-outs, meths drinkers, Hippies, Bover Boys and Fire-raisers, all united in their one desire to view the sexually retarded man so suddenly arrived in their midst and so nearly like themselves but for his umbrella, brief-case and Piccadilly hampers.

Merle's pad is a blanket, an old car seat and a very large and tattered musquash coat. Without electricity, it is by the light of a candle that Jason squats, slicing a Red Delicious. It is by the same light that he sees the dog-eared, tea-stained pamphlet between blanket and car seat. Idly extracting it, he expects nothing worse than a knitting pattern or the

draft commissariat list of the Commune. His shock, therefore, on seeing the title *The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm*, by Ann Koedt, is deep and prolonged, for here are four thousand words, each in the megaton range. And these emotions are selfless, for the first wave of horror is not for himself, but for the whole of mankind: 'You don't read that stuff?'

Merle remains queen: 'Why not?'

'Fanaticism . . . pure bloody fanaticism.'

Merle considers for a long time; her hair falling across the blanket to the bare boards: 'The victimisation of one sex by another . . . it's a fact, you can't write it all off as fanaticism.'

'You're looking at extremes . . . you don't seriously think that men can be dispensed with?'

'The vaginal orgasm doesn't exist.'

Jason is deeply worried and shows it by the way he mis-slices the apple.

'The only true orgasm is the clitoral one . . . the vaginal orgasm is a male lie, designed to enslave the woman to the phallus . . . exactly where *you* want her.'

'What a way to put it.'

'It's man's fundamental philosophy.'

Jason decides that this is true, but he can only shout: 'Heresy . . . after all the sacrifice . . .'

'Sacrifice!'

'On the fields of Agincourt . . . the plains of the Punjab . . . amidst the roses of Minden . . . on the waves of Jutland . . .'

'What's that got to do with it?'

'Men unstintingly giving their lives for this and that . . . at the going down of the sun . . . meat porters groaning under sides of brisket . . . window-cleaners suspended from rotting cables . . . rain-sodden policemen trudging behind their bloodhounds through the mire of Dartmoor . . . tree-loppers scrambling along the disintegrating boughs of doubtful elms . . . bunchers with numbed fingers in the watercress

beds . . . flushers and tosh-fakers in the sewers of London . . . I hardly know where to begin.'

'There you go, the all-male world.'

But Jason can only see disaster, a void planet slowly ceasing to spin and upsetting the laws of nature: 'No seasons, no atmosphere . . . one side perpetual day, the other perpetual night, either burn or freeze . . . and it's no good getting near the women or gulping in the air, that's all gone to Venus.'

'Where?'

'And gravity in trouble . . . mass and acceleration all to cock, and when you pull the chain . . . wiiiish, it all comes back at you.'

Merle's femininity is struggling upwards; she holds out her hand, fingers almost touching Jason's face: 'Things must change.'

'But this is far too drastic . . . think of something else, shoes for Civil Rights marchers . . . something for the whole of mankind.'

'*Mankind!*'

'You know what you're saying?'

'Of course.'

'Iysistrata . . . no copulation.'

'Freedom!'

'It wouldn't last . . . not for a day, not for an hour.'

'It will in the New Age.'

'Your ranks would be filled with traitors.'

'That's only wishful thinking.'

'Guerillas behind every bush.'

'We can deal with them.'

'Like the British in Ireland . . . a paddy behind every bothy . . . the grenade with the pin out . . . and then, in the middle of the night, the deserters, packing their nighties and out into the darkness, searching.'

'Searching!'

'Crawling with torches, tapping on doors, scratching on

windows . . . women begging to be let in, craving what is theirs by right . . .'

'That's what you hope.'

'Pleading.'

'If we're united, and the cause is right . . .'

Jason shakes his head :

'Human nature's too strong . . . you'd never get a majority, in fact you'd be lucky if you got five per cent.'

'There'll be a new age with a new conscience.'

'It's been going on too long, like breathing.'

'Animals evolve . . . fishes became amphibians . . . amphibians became . . .'

'That took millennia . . . and anyway no one would be able to evolve, *there wouldn't be anyone !*'

Even by the poor light of the candle, Jason can see that Merle is looking him straight in the eye.

'It's not that difficult.'

'No?'

'No.'

'All right, you tell me.'

'There's only one way, artificial insemination . . . only then will women gain freedom and self-respect.'

Jason's legs grow cold before the tidal wave of nauseous understanding. For the first time he sees the true extent of Great-Aunt Bessie's perfidity. Her exceedingly warped mind, something already hinted at by Mr Sydney Lom in the privacy of the solicitor's office, yet like an iceberg still largely submerged, is at last fully exposed. Thwarted throughout her life, battling grimly against changing opinion, Great-Aunt Bessie has ensured that in order to inherit her fortune her great-nephew, a young man of liberal views, shall not only marry at the earliest possible moment, but having married, shall consider intercourse only for procreation, and even were he allowed other thoughts, his wife, waving the pernicious pamphlet, will allow him no access, but would rather use a pre-charged hypodermic. A more perfect set of conditions for the happy 'milk and honey'

union stretching towards eternity would be hard to find. Thus when he hears the words 'artificial insemination', uttered with all the fire that Merle has previously been putting into her instructions to the Commune, Jason's dejection is so complete that, given a few boards of elm, a bag of nails and a shovel, not even the Senior Sexton of St Paul's could have restrained him. Yet the resilience of the human soul is such that even in this Stygian darkness Jason realises that once again, very much like his first hours with Donna when he was allowed a prolonged and uninterrupted view across the dinner table, this could be the kindness of Fate. For here is someone sweet and full of vitality, who will evolve and one day scorn her earlier ideas, but who is already anxious to share her pad, abiding at this stage by all Great-Aunt Bessie's rules.

Merle is a girl of impulse, whose actions appear at times completely contradictory. It is when the evening cocoa arrives in its plastic bucket that she shows the true extent of these contradictions by an action that Jason finds one of the most extraordinary he has ever witnessed. After their discussion on the merits or otherwise of the vaginal orgasm, and Merle's own expressed agreement with all the sentiments implicit in the pamphlet, she suddenly produces from her handbag a month's Pill Card with the information that it is 'fatal to miss a single day', and then fixes Jason with the sort of stare that suggests that were she to do so, or get into any other sort of difficulty, it will be entirely Jason's fault. Jason is so amazed that he suffers complete mental derangement and can only stare at the Pill Card and note that every day of the week is marked including Sundays, and that there is no rest even when God lays off. Then it is head up again to the girl that until a few seconds ago he thought his intended; now balancing Tuesday's on the tip of her tongue before swallowing it with the cocoa. Great-Aunt Bessie's mind was more twisted than a virile ivy.

'It doesn't make sense.'

‘Love is the response of a beaten cur.’

‘You can’t advocate something as radical as non-penetration one moment, and then, by a blatant act, suggest just the opposite. It makes you appear unreliable.’

Merle is unconcerned, even waving the Pill Card in his face, so although Jason is now a man of considerable experience, the wiles and deep-seated Freudian attitudes of this young girl are completely beyond him.

‘You’re acting like the Duke of York . . . neither up nor down.’

Although initially Merle gives him a not-tonight-Napolean look, in conformity with her contradictory nature, the look soon changes and all Jason’s old worries return. For if this girl, in spite of her subscription to the pamphlet, can keep the daily Pill intake regular, she must be expecting something, and with Mr Sydney Lom no more than a mile away, and Mr Jo Ferrara still ‘just round the corner’, there is absolutely nothing that Jason can do. He is in this gloomy state, still feeling the draught from Merle’s waving card and meditating on the polarities of life; the fact that a few excited molecules make all the difference between heat and cold; that Merle’s blonde hair has traces of brown; that after the age of sixteen his brain cells began to deteriorate; considering too what he will do when the crunch comes and Merle completely forgets her pamphlet and returns to the older, more normal practices, expecting Jason to join in, when a jet of icy water comes through the window with such force that it not only extinguishes every candle in the room but pitches the soaking night-watchman, who a moment or two ago lay quietly smoking pot on the window-sill, straight on to Merle’s bedding.

Jason loses Merle in the maelstrom, but he himself is lucky. Although ringing wet, owing to his brief-case and umbrella he attracts no attention either from the firemen, as they re-enact the siege of Château Gaillard, or from the police, as they sniff their way through the building. He is therefore able to wander slowly down the spiral stairs, saying,

'Excuse me', and waving his brief-case in front of any doubtful constable till he reaches the street. It is only when a cameraman sees his wet clothes and swings his flashlight that Jason flees into the darkness. From there to the all-night Post Office by Trafalgar Square is simple.

The badly smudged letter-card, addressed to Mr Sydney Lom and containing all the bitterness and misery that a soaking wet man can muster at two in the morning, when that man has already been suspended from a one-way yo-yo with a young girl as attractive as Merle, is as follows :

Situation now critical! Fled from Liverpool Street Commune half an hour ago after being saved from bewildering ignominy by timely intervention of Civil Authorities. However cannot continue relying on prompt action by Home Secretary for ever. Suggest you bring whole problem of Great-Aunt Bessie's will to International Court of Justice at The Hague and offer suitable and attractive prize.

Jason Albion Reeve

Ten

JASON IS on the landing, his finger firmly on Caroline's bell, as the first light of dawn softens the tired paintwork of the door. Caroline, her mouth open, her eyes shut, her cheeks swollen with sleep, throwing open the door, standing back, trying to dilate pupils, tossing away long wild auburn hair, coughing and saying: 'Christ! . . . Darling!'

Jason shuffling in, shivering, taking a cigarette from the open packet on the pneumatic plastic table, taking out his own matches, striking one that smoulders and sputters out in his hand, chucking the rest in the dirty fireplace.

'You might have told me you were coming.'

'How the hell did I know?'

Caroline fingering the wet jacket: 'You'd better take it off,' her eyes drop to his trousers, ' . . . and those.'

In Caroline's bed, the shivering down to a minute shudder, the flesh beginning to tingle, and Caroline herself acting as sheet, blanket, pillow and counterpane: 'More coffee?'

Jason nods. Caroline makes the kitchen and back in little over a minute: ' . . . Darling!'

'Darling!'

'Miss me?'

'I'll say.'

'How did it happen?'

'Idiots watering flower-boxes . . . larking about on the top of insurance offices, dead drunk . . . spraying decent passers-by.'

'At three in the morning!'

'Time means nothing to some people.'

'But it does to diddums, doesn't it?'

'Not really.'

'Not the other night . . . all that before or after ten stuff . . . when your whole life depended on it. Remember? And your aunt going under at two . . . *under what I should like to know?*'

'God! That's obscene . . . she's dead.'

'Hasn't diddums got two aunts?'

'You know perfectly well that the one that was involved in the time problem was the old one. Anyway, the whole conversation is pointless.'

'I've seen her!'

'I'm cold.'

Given this information, Caroline forgets the time problem and acts on it.

'Quite like old times.'

'Yes.'

'But not . . . exactly.'

Jason is cautious: 'Nothing can be completely re-created. Look how all those Hollywood movies failed; Caesar too tall . . . Caligula too small.'

'This isn't Rome, diddums.'

'Nevertheless, there's a parallel.'

'I'm bloody well in bed with you . . . and you said just now that you missed me, and now that I am here, you behave as if I had rabies. What the hell's happened to it?'

Jason, warm enough now to uncover a little, props himself on one elbow: 'You might as well know.'

'Don't say it like that.'

'I mentioned milk and honey . . . it's more than that, it's got to be absolutely pure and for eternity.'

'Diddums is off.'

'It's all been forced upon me.'

'Wriggling out of it.'

'Out of what?'

'The fact you're ditching me.'

'Nonsense.'

Caroline too is upright.

'I bloody well made you. You'd be nothing without me. Who went the rounds flogging your rotten photos? All that tramping in rain and fog . . . and what for?'

'Now listen.'

'You listen . . .'

Caroline well above him, the early sun burning the side of her hair :

'Walking in like this, you're jolly lucky.'

'Lucky!'

'Of course you are . . . lucky someone else wasn't here.'

'Who?'

Caroline shrugs.

'Not that old hairdresser with the weepy eyes and spots?'

'And why not?'

'My God! Surely you're a bit more selective than that.'

'Sod!'

'He can't even speak the Queen's English.'

'What's that got to do with it?'

'You must talk some time. You can't just go on and on . . . particularly with a man like that. You can tell a mile away that he couldn't last.'

'You're a fine one to talk.'

'Mine are peculiar circumstances.'

'*Bloody peculiar. What I want to know is what's gone wrong with it?*'

So far as Caroline is concerned, this angry exchange, with both voices rising to a crescendo, is intended to end in the sort of *rapprochement* that can only be achieved after the gap has been sufficiently widened for both parties to meet with such momentum; the reunion is a true revelation. And after her last shout Caroline feels the breach is ample and the return action should begin : 'Anyway . . .'

'Anyway what?'

'It's wrong to make someone a convenience.'

This drop in tone has an instant effect on Jason.

'I'm sorry . . . I'll explain.'

'Shhhh!'

'I must.'

Caroline with one hand over his mouth: 'I don't want to hear.'

'Lichen.'

'It really is almost like old times.'

Caroline is not auburn-haired, big-boned, large-breasted and wide of hip for nothing. Nor when she poses for the cover of *Director and Secretary* do the sales soar because of the advertisements. So when she makes this statement and puts the other hand down and begins a little shampooing in the original meaning of the word, at the same time ensuring that Jason is reminded of the undulations that make her what she is, he is instantly placed in considerable difficulties. In fact, he is certainly in no better position than on the golden ciderdown with Donna, and, with a second incursion by the London Fire Brigade unlikely, might even be in a worse one than earlier at the Liverpool Street Commune. But Jason, although a Reeve, is also a Trundel-Jones, and the Trundel-Joneses have been known to bring a gala performance of *The Beggar's Opera* to a halt with one wave of an alms bowl: 'I know what you need.'

'I've got it.'

'Woa!'

But to Caroline an erection like this is a shout of Tally Ho.

'Hold on, for God's sake!'

'Too late!' (which is not strictly true).

Jason's next cry is loud and from the heart: 'It's not possible . . . *you take the Pill!*'

Caroline, the helmswoman with everything poised, stops.

'So what . . . isn't that what you want?'

'Things have changed.'

'You crafty bastard . . . who got me on the Pill? Who said bury your old cap . . . chuck it in the dustbin?'

'Life is dynamic, nothing stands still.'

'And now, when it suits diddums he does a face about . . .

goes all choosy; doesn't like the Pill any more so he's back on the cap.'

'I'm looking for someone with *nothing*.'

Caroline recoils: 'Are you off your head . . . or have you been nicked like the Indians? Sixpence a time from the Ministry of Social Security. *Let's see it!*'

In an emergency like this, Jason can act quickly. He clasps Caroline in a close clinch so that she is unable to use arms or legs, and whispers: 'A holiday . . . a wonderful sun-drenched holiday . . . somewhere miles from here . . . the Maldives . . . Antigua, the Seychelles . . . all draped out on the golden sands . . .'

'Uuuurgh.'

'The men stopping to stare as they saunter by in their tight trunks . . . the ozone revitalising the old bronze . . . the sky an everlasting blue, no smog, no fog, no frost . . .'

'It's a lovely summer here!'

'God! Then we'll suffer for it soon.'

And Jason is out of bed and back in his wet clothes before Caroline can make out the exact course of events.

'Where the hell are you going?'

'To the travel agents.'

'Now!'

'While they still have vacancies.'

'It's six in the morning.'

'Somewhere in the world it's noon, they have to be prepared, it's their job.'

'Then phone.'

'There's nothing like the personal touch.'

Jason runs for the door still doing up his tie. If Caroline were to know that all he has in mind is a single ticket, she would have thrown the empty Cinzano bottle at him.

Eleven

MR JO FERRARA, tall, thin and with a downward-sloping mouth, gives the impression of coming from a long line of clowns. And in this his face does not lie, for Mr Ferrara's grandfather perfected one of the most famous of the Ligurian circus acts, carried out with seven buckets and two ladders and first performed at Genoa at the end of the last century. Mr Jo Ferrara, on the other hand, never followed his grandfather, but from an early age showed a marked interest in antiques, and with encouragement from wise parents made rapid strides in this study. However Mr Jo Ferrara's interests lay not in Chippendale, Sheraton and Adams, nor even Meissen, Delft or Staffordshire, but rather in the miniature reproduction of Dr Guillotine's brain-child in the form of ear-rings and snuff-boxes; the acquisition of strange instruments of leather and wood; wrought-iron shackles and leg irons, which he himself meticulously repainted; and from every part of the world the most ingenious apparatuses man has been able to devise in order to satisfy, titillate or supplant. Unfortunately, heavy racing debts have forced Mr Ferrara to sell the greater part of his personal collection, but here and there an old treasure has been carefully preserved, wrapped in tissue paper in one of the many shoe-boxes that line the walls of the spare room above the heavily papered shop window. In the remaining shoe-boxes Mr Jo Ferrara keeps his present stock, but with the prospects of demolition this stock is being allowed to dwindle; so that when Jason, after no more than two vodka and limes, makes his second appearance and is led up the rickety back stairs between the heavily flowered but now greasy wallpaper by Mr Jo Ferrara himself, that

authoritative collector is shaking his head and sadly muttering, 'Fings is so difficult . . . so difficult,' so that Jason too is concerned : 'The squeeze?'

Mr Jo Ferrara shakes his head more violently : 'Stock . . . if you'd come just one year ago . . . just one year.'

After ushering Jason through the artificially grained and heavily warped door, Mr Jo Ferrara begins rummaging through the rows of white boxes.

'It's a sorry situation, makes me almost ashamed to call myself English.'

'You mean no one wants this sort of thing any more?'

Mr Jo Ferrara looks sideways.

'Import restrictions . . . this Government.'

Jason is surprised that the present Government, unpopular as it is, should have singled out Pan, the Sylvan Method for this particular treatment. Did the Chancellor come down to the Dispatch Box and specifically mention Mr Jo Ferrara's little shop and stockroom along with the cancellation of the F I I I S? Governments have been known to do strange things.

'Perhaps after the next Election things will be better.'

But Mr Ferrara remains gloomy.

'Once the trend goes and people get out of the habit, it's like wimples and snout-faced bassinets.

Jason nods sympathetically. Mr Ferrara has a particularly fine box in his hands which, as Jason can see by the drawing on the side, once contained a pair of tartan-lined black leather boots for a medium-sized woman. What the box now contains he can only guess at, but by the delicately possessive way the owner clasps the article to his dirty grey pullover, Jason knows it is something exceedingly precious and should be in the main room of the British Museum.

'They're very rare.' This is Mr Jo Ferrara.

'I suppose so.'

'You try and find one.'

Mr Jo Ferrara very gently shakes the box : ' . . . even on the Continent.'

'I can believe it.'

'And this is genuine . . . an antique.'

Jason wonders whether he is expected to lift the lid himself, for although as yet he has no idea what form Mr Jo Ferrara's Pan, the Sylvan Method might take, he cannot believe it is in this box.

'Sixteenth century . . . late. Very few like it now, scour the world if you like.'

'Is that really Pan, the Sylvan Method?'

Instead of bringing the box nearer Mr Ferrara moves it away, giving Jason the same up and down look his daughter was wearing yesterday : 'Are you a collector?'

Jason, remembering his new wealth and the rising Times-Sotherby Index, is quick to nod. Mr Jo Ferrara winks : 'In that case you'll know exactly what it would fetch at auction.'

Jason now realises that he should have brought Uncle Felix with him, for Uncle Felix would have known exactly how to deal with this man. Uncle Felix would have acquired box and contents for less than twenty pence.

Mr Jo Ferrara brings his long thin face very close.

'Carved, but made of *what* ?'

Jason shakes his head.

'Go on, have a guess.'

'Wood.'

Mr Jo Ferrara laughs : 'What, and get splinters?'

Jason feels foolish and is determined to do better.

'Stone.'

Mr Jo Ferrara shakes his head.

'That would be too cold. Give 'em a nasty chill. Think of animals.'

'Tortoise-shell . . . ambergris?'

'Ivory.'

'Ivory!'

'Carved ivory, and all inlaid. Little symbols . . . all over it.'

Jason puts his hand out towards the box lid; Mr Jo Ferrara moves the hand away.

'Belonged to a countess.'

Jason is doubtful.

'... lived on the Loire, in one of the large châteaux ... right above the river. Her coat of arms is on the base, a falcon argent, gorged with a belt or, surmounted by two lions rampant gules ...'

Jason is impressed with Mr Jo Ferrara's erudition and realises he is in the presence of an expert.

'... not something you'd find every day of the week.'

'No.'

'Should really go to the nation.'

Jason is sad. Obviously he will never possess the article in the shoe-box. Put on the open market with American bidders jostling around like flies and closed-circuit television in the next room, the price would soar to the level of a Van Gogh. For an instant he forgets his legacy, but even were he to remember, the spell of the shoe-box is not quite strong enough for him to sell half his portfolio for something as yet unknown and unseen. Indeed, but for the growing fascination and the fact that as a Trundel-Jones he has a natural desire for possessions, particularly possessions liable to appreciate, his sudden wish to own the still anonymous article would be entirely irrational.

But Jason is not alone in his desire for a deal. While he is busy writing off his chances of ownership, all unknown to him Mr Jo Ferrara is recalling the money lost yesterday at Newmarket and his intention of visiting Sandown Park on Saturday. While Mr Jo Ferrara would like one hundred pounds, his is prepared to take less.

'Seventy-five quid.'

'Let's look inside.'

'Seventy.'

Jason shakes his head. Mr Jo Ferrara gently lifts the lid. The article nestling in the tissue paper and surrounded by dry bay leaves is something Jason has never seen before and

whose continued existence he doubted. It is, however, what he would call medium large to very large, and a very reasonable representation.

‘Poor soul!’

‘Sixty-five, and that’s giving it away. You don’t see workmanship like that today.’

‘Thirty.’

‘Sixty.’

‘Thirty-five.’

With Jason crawling slowly, they settle at forty-seven pounds fifty.

At the door, Mr Jo Ferrara holds out a thin, bony hand. Jason, overcome with goodwill, is quick to respond: ‘It will have a good home, I promise.’

Mr Jo Ferrara takes out an off-white handkerchief: ‘Thirty-five years.’

‘A long time.’

‘Right through North Africa . . . Alamein to Tunis.’

Jason wonders on which side.

‘And it brought you luck?’

Mr Jo Ferrara’s eyes go misty: ‘Like losing a piece of yourself.’

Naturally words like these uttered from so melancholy a face would tug at anyone’s heart, and Jason is actually halted with one foot on the doorstep, the other on the pavement.

‘. . . We all have our replacement symbols . . . cars, hi-fi, stereo, yachts . . .’

Then Jason remembers.

‘My God! This isn’t what I came about,’ he waves the box before Mr Jo Ferrara’s face, ‘. . . this isn’t, Pan, the Sylvan Method, this is . . .’

But Mr Jo Ferrara is shaking his head.

‘If only you’d come last year.’

‘You mean you’ve sold out?’

Mr Jo Ferrara points towards the giant cranes, half-

finished blocks of flats and acres of rubble: 'All this redevelopment.'

Jason is desperate: 'What was it . . . perhaps I can make it myself?'

Mr Jo Ferrara gazes towards the distant industrial haze.

'You must remember . . . think. Pan, the Sylvan Method . . . you can't forget something like that . . . not an expert like you'

But all Mr Jo Ferrara can see at the moment is horses being led round and round within a white-fenced paddock.

'We get so much through our hands.'

'Was it perhaps made from fungus . . . dried roots . . . bird droppings . . . charred feathers collected in the early morning with the dew on them?'

A trace of a smile crosses Mr Jo Ferrara's clown-like features:

'I seem to remember . . . it had something to do with Germany . . . we had a parcel from a charcoal-burner in the Black Forest.'

Twelve

A MISTY evening, rare for midsummer: the lake as colourless as the sky; the orange sun flat, draining hills, valleys and trees to plain cardboard mounts. From the house, with curtains open and the light mingling with rising swarms of gnats, voices reach as far as the clump of golden willows beyond the summer house, announcing to bats, owls, nightjars and others that Uncle Felix is entertaining.

Even in youth Herr Hans Haushofer looked strange with his overlarge warted nose, red ears and short-cropped hair, but now, in the last ebb of a late prime, his once athletic body has begun to falter and fatten, the neck to swell so much that it is not uncommon for him to have to drive a hundred miles on the autobahn to find a suitable tailor or shirtmaker. Add to this the complete disappearance of his natural waistline and the subsequent worry about the failure of his trousers, a worry that is always with him, being too vain a man to wear braces, and it is easy to see that the Herr Hans Haushofer that has entered the seventies is very different from the Hans Haushofer that entered the forties. On that September morning when Hauptmann Haus^hfer and his crew lifted their solitary Dornier 17 from the Normandy airfield, dipped their bomb-laden wings in salute to the watching Reichsmarshall, things had been very different. Then he was a hero marching against England, who only the night before had been sporting with a local maiden, whose long hair had so reminded him of his own beloved Inge, sadly keeping the home fires burning in their little house in the suburbs of Bremen. It was while in the final stages of this sport in the derelict dairy near the officers' billet that the irony of war first came to him. For the next

day he was to take his green and grey aircraft across the Channel at the lowest possible altitude to foil the English radar, then follow the railway to Silhampton Junction, before striking due west. There, camouflaged amidst the rare arboreal specimens, he was to find the four rows of sheds and the country house known as Cobbler's Drove; home of that famous prophylactic manufacturer, Trundel International. For as the Reichsmarshal had said: 'Destroy Trundel International and we have them lower than their knees,' and as his own scholarly but fanatical Generaloberst had said: 'The English swine think they can take something from Bethnal Green and hide it in a Plantagenet manor, but Kampfgeschwader Thirty-Six will find it.' What neither the Reichsmarshal nor the Generaloberst nor Hauptmann Hans Haushofer himself took into account was the Mare.

On that same September morning, Lance-Corporal Mare, then a noted poacher and member of the Local Defence Volunteers, was on duty in the small sand-bagged Lewis-gun post built over the old cricket pavilion at the end of the little valley in which sits Cobbler's Drove. As Lance-Corporal Mare, he not unnaturally had a hand in siting this particular post, and based its location on the probable flight of any disturbed pheasants. Having received severe professional criticism from a retired Indian Army doctor, he is filled with an almost neurotic desire to prove that this particular location would have been chosen by the Iron Duke himself were he to have been given the honour of defending Cobbler's Drove rather than the ridge at Waterloo. The Mare therefore spends every minute of duty leaning over the parapet, peering down the valley, screwing up his eyes and fiddling with the safety catch of either the twelve-bore shot-gun or the 1917 Lewis gun, and drawing beads on this and that, but mainly on the white-capped work-girls behind the still unfrosted panes of the lavatory.

On the morning of Operation Puncture (a subsidiary of Sea Lion), with the sky clear and the sun bright, it is the Lewis gun upon which Lance-Corporal Mare rests his chin

with all the patience his evenings in the woods have taught him. It must be allowed, in view of what ensued, that the Dornier came from the direction that he expected, but the sight of it was as much a surprise to him as was the sudden sight of Cobbler's Drove to Hauptmann Hans Haushofer and his crew. Nevertheless Lance-Corporal Mare had seen the Dornier, whereas Hauptmann Haushofer had not seen the Lewis gun, so that when the plane made its second run, Lance-Corporal Mare was ready. For once, the gun did not jam, and one drum was enough. For a week Lance-Corporal Mare was the toast of every mess, wardroom and dispersal hut in the Free World, and an inspiration to many under the heel of the oppressor. For the vanquished there was the ignominy of walking past the tittering white-smocked girls to Uncle Felix's office. And all this after surviving a drop in oil pressure over the Isle of Wight and a flight of Hurricanes near Silhampton. But even in the worst situations, when the human frame is at the ebb of its endurance, there can be unexpected compensations. With the Reichsmarshal's words still ringing hollowly in his ears, one sight of Uncle Felix, standing framed by sales chart and productivity curve, was enough to tell the Hauptmann that friend and foe had one thing in common: an absolute passion for the production, distribution and promotion of non-durable consumer goods. The Hauptmann also realised that if only he could switch the conversation more to the subject of marketing and away from the very restricting time, rank and number, all would be well. Even in the hour before the Military Police arrived, Hauptmann Haushofer persuaded a delighted and flattered Uncle Felix to sketch out his post-war schedule and the Hauptmann could see that no matter who won the war the future growth of Trundel International was assured. For Uncle Felix, a businessman of genius, besides foreseeing the population explosion, also foresaw that in an age of conscience, if the underdeveloped countries could not afford a trundel, the 'haves', in their own interests, would make sure they were not left without.

For the next four years, throughout his captivity, Hauptmann Haushofer showered Uncle Felix with a barrage of postcards outlining schemes of promotion for every part of the globe. Although such close attention from a POW was at times embarrassing, sound foundations were laid.

Today, Herr Hans Haushofer, European Director of Trundel International, with his long-legged, surprisingly pretty daughter Freda—as Jason can see, certainly no scrubber from the houses of Hamburg—are Uncle Felix's guests of honour, sharing the long, highly polished table, not only with the complete Limoges, but also with the Trundel Jones-monographed George III silver. To Jason, the situation is so filled with wonder he has considerable difficulty keeping his mind on any one thing. Firstly there is Donna herself, who, having striven to be the most ravishing woman in the room, has succeeded brilliantly. In her Arabian jacket, edged with gold braid and opening down the middle towards deep saffron pantaloons, she far outstrips the German girl, whose pale green ensemble appears almost dowdy. But that judgement is purely based on colour and is not unlike comparing a peacock with open fan to a corn bunting or tree-creeper. Both the corn bunting and tree-creeper have much to recommend them. So it is with Freda Haushofer. In the matter of age she has the advantage over Donna of perhaps ten years, and with this goes a quite startling visible innocence, certainly something Donna is quite unable to convey. Then, of course, there is the very unusual situation of victor and vanquished, in the form of the Mare and Herr Haushofer, with the bizarre juxtaposition of their respective roles: Herr Haushofer at the table and the Mare crawling round with the vegetables. To Jason, who only this morning has had a refresher on the Mare's great exploit, especially reissued in the light of the German director's imminent arrival, the sight of these one-time adversaries locked in no more mortal combat than the rearrangement of the spoon that serves the sauté potatoes is as unreal as if Uncle Felix were to consider a voluntary

donation to the Minister for the Arts. But then Jason is ignorant of the psychological nuances to be found in warfare between civilised countries. Although the Mare unquestionably shot Herr Haushofer, 'a Jerry', down, Herr Haushofer was an officer, and the Mare, owing to birth and deformity of foot, no more than a lance-corporal in an irregular force. The Mare therefore is perfectly willing to accept the situation, which after all has acquired for him a permanently cushy billet at Lower Brandy Manor. It is only when he opens the old tin trunk, uncovers the gibbet emblem from the Dornier and feels the jagged metal with the lingering smell (Uncle Felix having forbidden that it should hang on the wall in case Herr Haushofer should see it), that he is reminded of their old relationship.

Tonight it is the sight, smell and proximity of Freda Haushofer that takes Jason's mind rapidly away from the possibilities of an international situation. Although Donna has done all in her power to ensure that the long-legged Freda is inaccessible to Jason, both before and during dinner, her husband, much to her annoyance, is acting in quite the opposite way, insisting on changing places so that Jason is constantly finding himself close to this Mädchen and some way from Donna. And naturally this game of musical chairs is greatly enjoyed by Jason, who, by the middle of the Bœuf Bourguignonne, is doing very well, and not without a certain amount of help from the ex-Hauptmann. For although like any other father Herr Haushofer is silently saying to himself, 'That young (English) lout shall never screw my daughter,' he is also remembering all he himself has gained from his association with the Trundel-Joneses and, more particularly, every word Uncle Felix breathed about 'hopeful unions' when they were together in the study. He therefore makes much of Jason, singing his praises and those of all the new generation so fired with ideas, while thinking back to his own days with the Hitler Youth, and how good they were, and what fun and good exercise it was chasing Jews down

the street and smearing their backsides with yellow paint. And later, when they are back in the sitting room with the coffee, this ex-Luftwaffe ace rises, stands beneath the fifteen-shilling reproduction of an early Turner, set in a twenty-seven-guinea frame (the first glimmer of art, but only for investment, is just reaching Uncle Felix), raises his glass before his own ever-red face, thereby magnifying his nose to gargantuan proportions, and proposes the health of the 'new young', coupling the names of Freda and Jason. Donna is so disgusted by this act that although she is normally the last one to drop or break anything, being exceedingly discreet with her hands, she now swings her elbow back sufficiently viciously to tip the whole of Freda's glass of Calvados down between the girl's dress and bra, and is only sad that the girl does not swoon from burns. Only Jason has a complete understanding of Donna's action, although strangely the Mare, moving with the coffee, and being quite the most psychologically oriented inhabitant of Lower Brandy Manor, does have an inkling of what is going on in his mistress's mind and gives Jason a none-too-gentle dig in the ribs in passage. Jason, feeling now that the explosive situations are multiplying too fast, for the rest of the evening keeps as far away from Freda as possible, standing right behind Donna's chair, and while careful not to upset his uncle, persuades his aunt to lay back her head and relax. When Freda excuses herself for bed, even though all his training cries out for him to run to the door, Jason remains immobile and smiling, even gently patting the back of Donna's hair. It is not till it is Donna's turn that he dashes for the door, yet even so this Daughter of the Prophet sails from the room, her lips drawn back, her breath coming in short bursts and her eyes looking neither to the right nor the left. Jason is only too aware of the depths of his misdeemeanor and the titanic struggle that will be his in trying to redress the situation.

Jason's acquisition of the Charles IX dildo from Mr Jo Ferrara was prompted by the delights of novelty, a touch of the vicarious, and the natural Trundel-Jones instinct for ownership. Nevertheless, such was Jason's upbringing that not only did he have considerable misgivings in even approaching the shop, but the moment he left with his purchase he was assailed by doubts. Now the instrument is in his possession, however, everything has changed. Any shame or guilt that may have accompanied his return to Lower Brandy with the shoe-box—the secretive way in which he had taken the article upstairs and hidden it in the space behind the large walnut wardrobe; the first fugitive inspections by the light of a torch; the gentle fingering of a heterosexually orientated man—are giving way to a sense of pride and achievement. For Jason is now more than ever convinced that in the world of antiques and art treasures he has something outstanding, of considerable value and cheap. And with possession comes familiarity. In the same way as the new car owner who, when he first settles in the uncrinkled leather seat, cautiously exercises flashers, stalks, wipers and washers, but after less than twenty miles is throwing switches and pulling knobs like a veteran signalman outside King's Cross, so it is with Jason. By the evening of the Haushofer dinner, his acquaintanceship with the consolation of the late unfortunate Countess and, presumably, her friend, is nearing completion. Already he could reproduce a good likeness of the etchings of the 'shaft'; the coat of arms and the inlaid filigree. True, tonight's handling is tinged with nostalgia; the dinner, wines and presence of both Donna and Freda under the same roof are factors, but it is still pride of possession, warmth at a good bargain and a love of antiques that make him examine the soft and still surprisingly sound leather straps with more than his usual interest. And with the handling run the thoughts. As a child, Jason found a sailor's hat in the dry earth hump of a banana tree, and in the same way that before coyly trying it on he looked up and down the

plantation, so now he peers around the room, even scanning beneath the bed, before taking a more purposeful grip on the four leather straps. Jason has always been lucky in the matter of clothes, being the size most commonly modelled throughout the ready-to-wear couture industry. In shoes and hats, shirts and gloves, he is equally fortunate, and it now appears that this good fortune is not confined to being the perfect tailor's dummy, but that were he to find himself in the electric chair, it would fit every contour of his body as if it had been moulded round him. Not surprisingly therefore, even with the aged straps a little tight, sleep comes sweetly and quickly to Jason Albion Reeve.

It is the middle watch of the night with a pale moon on the wane; the owls hooting in the high beech, and down by the lake a solitary heron waiting for the dawn on one side, while a badger shuffles and sniffs on the other. It is the moment when all the fine clarets of the evening, having worked their way through Jason's system, are now crying aloud for freedom, troubling his bladder with sensuous and painful irritations, and automatically he leaps from his bed and out on to the charcoal Wilton. So violent is the thump of his feet on the floor, however, that the one person living awake in the darkness and brooding over the events of the evening is instantly alerted. Donna slides snakelike from her bed and with no more than a reassuring glance at the open mouth of her snoring husband, glides towards the door, opening it just sufficiently to see Jason in full, hasty movement. But it is not Jason himself that catches Donna's eye, fine as he is, but rather the magnificent carved ivory that had once graced the Sapphic Countess (or her friend) in that lonely château by the Loire, and which now precedes its new owner with such perfection of design that even Donna's hawk's eyes, accustomed to the darkness, cannot tell the difference, believing quite naturally that margar-

inc is butter. The landing at Lower Brandy, an extensive area, with two large oak chests and a giant wardrobe, is in the shape of an L, and the nearest lavatory to Jason is in the bend of this L, with its inner door invisible to Donna. Also in the blind part is Freda's room, so that when Donna sees the tall, tousled young man sporting such magnificence she can do very little but gasp, wonder, and stagger back to bed, convinced that the young German girl is far luckier than she deserves. It is not till some minutes later, when the full horror of the situation and the sight itself have bitten deep into her soul, that she leans across, picks up *The Happy Investor*, and taps Uncle Felix on the side of the head, with the repeated cry: 'An intruder . . . an intruder . . . quick!'

At the moment of summons, Uncle Felix is strolling with the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Governor of the Bank of England through a fairy garden set high above a diamond mine, where the sun, in the form of real bullion, is always shining and where every stock and share you plant in the rich yielding top soil appreciates so rapidly that rows of happy smiling negroes have to be constantly employed cutting them down and handing them to a continuously passing Felix. It is into this Elysium, heightened by the fact that his temples are being tapped by *The Happy Investor*, that Donna's voice penetrates.

They stand on the landing; Uncle Felix half asleep, swaying on his feet, annoyed that his dream was broken just at the golden moment when the small insignificant bond he had so assiduously watered was about to burst into full double-leaf bonus.

'Where?'

Donna points dramatically towards the blind limb of the landing: 'There!'

'How do you know?'

'I heard him . . . thumps.'

Uncle Felix shivers. Donna, as usual, is impatient: 'For God's sake, be a man.'

Uncle Felix indicates the door of Freda's room : 'There !
I can't go in there.'

'Why ever not ?'

'Think of the young woman.'

'Think of the young woman, think of the young woman
... *what the hell do you think I'm doing?*'

Donna advances on the door. Uncle Felix, goaded into
action, lays his hand on the knob : 'Are you certain ?'

'Of course I'm certain.'

'How can you be, if you only heard him ?'

'I know my landing . . . he's in there,' and she follows
these three words with a sheikh-sized shudder indicating
the depth of her distress, and forcing her husband into the
darkened room.

'There's no one here.'

'Under the bed.'

Uncle Felix bends, but in less than fifteen seconds he is
back on the landing.

'No one there either.'

'The window . . .'

Uncle Felix, with one of his kindest and most gentle
actions, shakes his head and slips his arm round his wife :
'You've been hearing things.'

But, of course, one of the characteristics of the Begherrehs
is stubbornness, and Donna has inherited her full quota.
The moment she feels the loving pressures of her husband
just below her breasts she remembers the vision on the
landing, and driven onwards by excitement, love, hate,
jealousy and frustration, she points at Jason's door : 'Then
he must be in there.'

'Nonsense.'

And without waiting further, Donna marches into her
nephew-in-law's room only to see a quietly sleeping Jason
who does not wake till a hissed cry of 'Son of a camel'
close to his ear makes him sit up in amazement. Naturally
believing this venomous whisper to stem from his actions
at the dinner table, he is even more admiring of the per-

sistence of this woman who can sustain a sleepless night on such a slight pretext. However, he is too sleepy and surprised to make any comment.

Back on the landing, a solicitous Uncle Felix says, 'Nothing there,' words that, far from helping, make Donna clasp her hands together and mutter, 'Too late . . . too late . . . and no wonder,' so that Uncle Felix, thinking the Athol Brose at dinner was too strong, inquires sweetly: 'What was too late?'

'We were, of course.'

'And why no wonder?'

Donna's look is far away: 'You wouldn't understand. A thing like that couldn't be kept . . . *it was explosive!*'

'Like what?'

Donna makes vague gestures with her hand: 'Like that . . . so . . . so magnificent . . . so unique . . . so gallant . . . *a true pathfinder!*'

'You've been dreaming.'

Donna gives a cry and covers her face; the unfairness of life is almost more than she can bear. It is a sad, worried Uncle Felix that leads her, suffering but still scheming, back to bed.

Uncle Felix has a bad night. Although managing a little sleep after the walk with Donna, the golden dream never returns. Instead there is a short sharp nightmare in which he finds himself shackled to a wall while a black rubber-suited skin-diver that turns out to be a bear in disguise keeps chalking falling prices on a bookie's board, and as each price drops, so the shackles that hold him enlarge till at last, after blotting everything from his vision, they burst in a pyrotechnic display of dazzling Turneresque colours. Although he does not actually awake screaming, his hair is so bristly that he is forced to climb into Donna's bed. It is a considerable time since Uncle Felix last threw off his own coverlet and took those three steps around both *The Sacred Law* and *The Happy Investor*; and as he rolls

back the golden eiderdown that signifies the beginnings of Donna's domain, he feels very much the small man huddled under the castle walls looking for the unbarred window or the crack in the portcullis chain. But Donna's castellated fabric has been well maintained. After spending the first half of the night awake, the middle seething with indignation and the early-dawn period running over the more exotic tortures, recalled from tales of her childhood, when Uncle Felix arrives at around five-fifteen Donna is so exhausted that anyone but Jason could have climbed in beside her without her body giving more than the inevitable unconscious twitch associated with the deformation of the mattress. So it is that as Uncle Felix cautiously slips his arms over and under her, drawing them together within the narrow confines of the bed, the response is no more than were he to have folded the Ishafan and lain with it in a cold bath.

Uncle Felix, in spite of his obsessions with business efficiency, capital appreciation and interest rates, is still a man. It is not surprising therefore that after such a night when his wife ran about the landing in a state of Oriental frenzy, calling out 'Too late' and muttering 'Magnificent' over and over again, as if she had just seen an early illuminated version of the Koran, and later turned her back on him with all the finality of a sulking dromedary, that Uncle Felix should be very much on edge when he and Herr Hans Haushofer walk slowly through the rose garden the following morning. But Uncle Felix has more than the night to worry him. He has the problem of Trundel International, epitomised by the long plunging red line on the annual report, the one Miss Hatter held up so ominously for Jason to see, and the one that so puzzled the young man. For the truth is that for all Jason's theories of demoniacal solicitors or dinosauric trends amongst *homo sapiens*, the sudden decline in the fortunes of Trundel International can be attributed to one thing and one thing only, the Pill.

'Der Pill!' Herr Haushofer, kicking the top off a daisy.

'The Pill!' Uncle Felix.

'Der Cap kaput!' Herr Haushofer beheading two more daisies and a buttercup.

'The writing on the wall . . . evolution, happens to every industry. It will mean new factories, new plant, and for us a whole new technology. And with money so tight it will be very, very expensive.'

Herr Haushofer sadly shakes his head: 'It is the young, and all this freedom. Everything we fought for,' but this inverted piece of Teutonic philosophy is lost on Uncle Felix who would not be where he is now had he not already made up his mind. Even as he crawled into Donna's bed in the early hours of the morning and wrapped himself round that inert figure, he was deciding that if Trundels are to continue to prosper there is only one solution. They must make the greatest switch in their long history with an innovation no less exciting than that of the Inventor, Old Gutta Percha Roger himself. The moment Uncle Felix arrives in the office, Miss Hatter will receive her instructions. She will then ring Sir Cello Tiffel, senior partner of Tiffel and Lots, the well known merchant bankers, and arrange a meeting.

Thirteen

DONNA HAS feigned sickness, an acute shortage of breath, palpitations, flush and splitting fingernails to avoid opening the Red Cross sale of bric-à-brac at nearby Abbots Chumley but, unable to find a substitute and with the good name of the Trundel-Joneses uppermost in his mind, Uncle Felix at last persuades her. Even then her final efforts to avoid the approaching cosmic morass are prodigious, for she issues a pressing invitation to Freda Haushofer to accompany her, and this young girl would be overwhelmed were it not for Uncle Felix again, who, thinking of the hoped-for union, suggests that on such a lovely day Freda would do far better lying in her bikini by the swimming pool. And as Donna, her eyes fixed on the driving mirror, swings her silver Lamborghini Islero out through the gates of Lower Brandy Manor, it is in fact by the swimming pool, and in her bikini, that Jason finds Freda.

Freda and Jason are both good swimmers and there is a very natural, uninhibited period of water carnival before they return to the hot pavings around the edge of the pool and sit watching their feet-marks drying in the sun. And while they sit, Jason steals sideways glances at the young legs beside him. On these legs he sees no trace of miz-maze, nothing but a fine down giving them an altogether continental look, something he cannot remember seeing on either Caroline's or Merle's legs, but then not only was Caroline born in Houndsditch, but so far as Merle is concerned, the light within their Liverpool Street Commune was nowhere near as good as out here in Uncle Felix's country home. And when Jason thinks of Uncle Felix and the fact that this Rhine Maiden is not his uncle's wife and that therefore

there can be no barrier or constraint between them, nothing but the natural courtesy between different nationalities, he is happy. That Freda might know of the mysteries of the Black Forest charcoal-burners and be the key to his whole future sends a surge of pure pleasure leaping within him, tempered only by the thought that Donna's visit to the Victorian bric-à-brac is not permanent.

For Freda Haushofer, too, life has been sheltered. Widowed at an early age, Herr Haushofer took over the upbringing of his only child with the same fanatical drive and efficiency he had shown years earlier in the Hitler Youth, the Luftwaffe and in his letter-writing and market-research activities in the POW camps of England and Canada. Carefully shielded from her father's mistresses, brought up in the strictest Lutheran faith with the church as her guardian, denied all access to the literature her father keeps locked away in the small hole in the wall behind the schnapps, Freda has grown into an extremely pretty but Protestantly orientated girl who sees purity as life's goal, a mantle to be worn to the altar where her bridegroom will be waiting in a similar suit, only his would be held together with those priceless shining rivets so beloved of Wagner. German to the backbone therefore, but with the internationalism of her youth and times already beginning to gnaw, and with her mind firmly set on raising the status of the seventh Commandment at least to that of number two, it is nothing more than a healthy young woman who has been sported in the pool with the same innocent 'Strength through Joy' gestures that so characterised her mother and drew the eye of Herr Haushofer long ago. Also, a short holiday spent in close confinement with a group of nuns obsessed with body odour has given her an additional psychosis, adding considerably to her determination to maintain purity at all costs. Her ability quickly and completely to erect a barrier towards the other sex is well known as far south as Friedrichshaven.

It is while the sun is still high, and the shadows small

and precise, that Jason suggests they walk across Fagg's Mead, the meadow beyond the lake. When Freda agrees, slips on an interesting but frail sun-top, Jason happily leads the way, exchanging simple little pleasantries about England and Germany, watching the grass wrap round their feet, twisting itself into knots beyond the imagination of the most devoted Boy Scout and exploding the pods, throwing their weightless seeds into the summer air where they float like transparent helicopters over a tall green sea. So perfect is this setting and so moved is Jason not only by the tranquillity of the countryside, but also by the evident and shining purity of Freda herself, that even the sight of the unwanted weeds affects him, and the thought that before long they will be slaughtered and mutilated by apocalyptical tractors brings a little midsummer sigh. And it is this midsummer sigh that turns Freda's head, and for a second makes her forget that holiday in the nunnery, so that she actually closes towards Jason and, with the sun full on her face, displays the sub-sub freckles he has never noticed before.

When William of Orange's horse stumbled upon a molehill that borish monarch never recovered. With Freda, things are much better. Not only is she unmounted and therefore has a far shorter distance to fall, but however attentive William's Gentleman of the Bedchamber, no one could possibly have equalled Jason for devotion and speed. When Freda cries out and sinks to the ground with her hand firmly clasped on her ankle, Jason's own hand is alongside sharing the clasp so quickly that even Jason is surprised and gratified at the rapid computation qualities of his own brain. And as well as surprise and gratification there is happiness and fulfilment, for although no doctor, a few movements of his fingers are sufficient to tell Jason that nothing is broken and that sitting here in the grass holding this particular ankle is one of the most pleasant things he has ever been called upon to do. At last all the weary practice with the bandages and splints on the floor of the school gymnasium is paying the sort of dividends he

has dreamed about but which he never expected to receive.
'Rest for a while.'

The girl shakes her head and tries to rise, but Jason sees this as an opportunity to slip his arms round, and while pretending to help, merely increases the natural effect of gravity. But Freda is worried, deeply worried, in many places there is little between them but her own flimsy sun top, and as Jason increases the pressures, so all the candles in Bavaria and Lower Württemberg begin whirling in a kaleidoscopic medley of guilt :

'I must go.'

'You can't.'

'I can hop.'

'It's a quarter of a mile.'

Jason shakes his head.

'Too far, much too far.'

The girl sniffs and looks frightened. Jason can only hope that as she sits with him gently massaging her leg her confidence will slowly return and with it a little of the relaxation that is now so sadly lacking.

Situations are not easily contrived, and even when they are they seldom take the direction their impresario plans. So it is with Jason. In walking across Fagg's Mead he has foreseen little but a pleasant means of furthering the very civilised process of introduction and making tentative enquiries into the flora and fauna of the Black Forest. However, the molchill has brought him into much closer contact far quicker than he had anticipated. Although this girl is attractive and any right-minded young man would obviously have eventual hopes beyond a simple rustic stroll, even on so short an acquaintanceship, Jason appreciates that this is no Lili of the Lamplight, but rather a refined and well-cared-for girl, whose father has never let her far from the straps of his Lederhosen. Further, the purity of her skin and the perfection of her face suggest that even the facts of life themselves may be strange to her,

partly confirmed during that delightful period when he first laid hands on her ankle and wandered further afield to check on the functioning of the calf muscle and she showed no reaction beyond that of a sister. Now, sitting next to him, he watches her neatness and the peculiar wholeness that he cannot recall with either Caroline, Merle or Donna. He is unable to explain this wholeness even to himself, knowing only that it has to do with summer and Freda's slow relaxation. However, in this particular case the wholeness is so absolute, he is subject to an almost unbearable feeling of protection and compassion, again something he has never felt with either Caroline or Merle, and even less with Donna. One way in which this feeling might be expressed is to carry Freda back across the meadow, and this he would have done were it not for the possibility of Donna's early return and the extensive vista from the front of the house. As it is, he seizes the welcome opportunity to delve deeper into the subject that seems to have given Mr Jo Ferrara amnesia: 'There's nothing quite like it . . . not in the early morning with the dew on the cobwebs.'

Freda is surprised.

'What?'

'The Black Forest.'

Freda smiles; more confidence returns.

'You know it?'

'Like any other tourist.'

Freda tilts her head back.

'It is very beautiful.'

'Deep in the forest . . . below the fallen leaves where the moss grows thickest and the anemones vie with the wild cyclamen . . . and in the clearings the charcoal-burners sing as they slice their lunchtime sausage . . . that's where I feel happiest.'

'You love nature?'

'It's the only true panacea . . . with its little touches of magic.'

'You like the Fairy Tales?'

Jason shakes his head : 'It's not so much the actual tales; more a matter of things handed down . . . recipes.'

Freda nods : 'From father to son . . .'

'Exactly . . . ancient mixtures, even methods, laughed at now, but full of wisdom and common sense . . . things we may have almost forgotten.'

Freda is now so relaxed her peal of laughter covers several acres : 'Like putting a cork under your pillow.'

'Or cutting the wheat sheaves from a wedding dress.'

Freda's worries return. She remembers the nuns, moves her arms and looks at her feet. Jason proceeds cautiously : 'Not, of course, that that is unique to the Black Forest.'

'No.'

'As things have changed, so have the symbols and the needs. Once it was all the other way, plenty of sons and daughters to till the soil . . . now . . .'

Freda moves uneasily on the grass : 'What has this to do with the Black Forest?'

'The Black Forest is a mystic place . . . you know, of course, about the story of Pan?'

The girl hesitates. To say 'Yes' would be untrue, but would certainly stop this young man talking. It would also, contrary to normal practice, be the wisest thing to say. On the other hand if she says 'No' it may lead anywhere : 'There are so many stories about Pan.'

Jason is surprised, finding it hard to think of a single one : 'Pan in the Black Forest . . .'

The girl is puzzled : 'In the Black Forest !'

'He went there.'

The girl shrugs doubtfully.

'Curious chap the God of the Woods . . . ugly, with that strange mouth and long ears, but clever . . . not the sort of chap you'd associate with . . . *something so useful*.'

'I never knew he went to the Black Forest.'

'Went all over the place . . . followed Bacchus to India, there was no holding the fellow.' Jason drops his voice, takes a deep breath and places his head close to Freda. 'It

was in the Black Forest that he perfected . . . *something*.'

Freda's face is blank. Jason is disappointed, but, in view of her undoubted innocence, not surprised.

'What did he perfect?'

Jason takes an even deeper breath and lowers his voice still further.

'*His method!*'

At the instant he utters these words, Jason increases the pressure of his arm, and this delicate girl, with the very short slip over her almost negligible bathing attire and the perfect continental legs, turns her head, fixes him straight in the eyes with her own deep blue Germanic ones, and says: 'Be careful!'

Now Jason really is surprised. Obviously in Germany Pan, the Sylvan Method is much better known than he had expected, for even in skating round the subject he has offended this young woman (assuming that the little massage and exploration can justifiably be considered medical treatment). So, not unnaturally taking Freda's short words as a rebuke, his amazement shows not only in the way he draws back, but by the look of martyrdom in his face and the mahogany stare in his eyes. The problem is, of course, one of language. When Freda says, 'Be careful!' she is not saying, 'One more step and another hint about Pan's method and I'll slap your face,' as Jason quite wrongly supposes. Her 'Be careful!' can be translated as 'I do not understand a word you are saying even though my English is generally reckoned to be very good, but I have a number of problems, so please do not commit yourself too far this early, in case you are disappointed . . . I should hate to see you hurt.' A perfectly reasonable statement by any nice girl, and one that, but for the mistaken inflections when speaking a foreign tongue, would have reached Jason without misinterpretation.

And so they walk slowly back across Fagg's Mead in silence, which surprises and saddens Freda, who is just

beginning to understand that there are more things in heaven and earth than her father appears to know about, and that the nuns too are at fault, having been far too quick to generalise from the particular. But presumably in their case they have never had the pleasure of meeting a nice young Englishman in his own country, or taken a walk with him across so beautiful a field as Mr Fagg's.

The sun is round to the west, arching above the tall aspens, when Jason helps Freda decorously over the stile and on to the mown grass. Nevertheless, there is still sufficient light to see Merle's blood-red coupé standing in the drive immediately next to Donna's Lamborghini Islero, and the air is still enough for the voices of both women to float across the length of the lawn. But it is the silence when the women within move to the window, and see the couple without, that is the most memorable event of the afternoon.

Merle, on the pretext of discussing pictures, pens Jason in a corner of the hall :

'You left me to rot !

'Rot ?'

'Dragged off by the fuzz, and what do you do?'

Jason makes hopelessly inadequate motions with his hands, his eyes move towards the open door of the sitting room, in which Donna and Freda sit listening.

'Left me to be assaulted.'

Jason is shocked : 'Assaulted !'

'Not that way . . . stupid.'

Jason is relieved.

'I'm no Horatius.'

'You were sharing my pad, weren't you?'

This remark is loud and unfortunate. Donna, the vision on the landing still fresh in her mind, is convinced she understands the Freda-Jason situation just refurbished in Fagg's Mead, and is only astonished at the speed. Now her worst fears on the Jason-Merle complex are also confirmed.

Freda, her bourgeois foundations crumbling fast, is simply worried about everything. Jason begs for quiet: 'Shhhh!'

'Weren't you?'

At this stage, both Donna and Freda give up all pretext of trying to talk and all four ears go decibel-hunting.

'Not fully.'

'What do you mean, not fully?'

Donna, next door, is shaking so violently, she has to clasp her own beads.

'Only in one way.'

'Were you or were you not sharing my pad?'

It is now quite obvious to Jason that Merle, in view of her propensity for the Pill, could never really have been Great-Aunt Bessie's first choice and therefore he can now fight back with nothing to lose. With a quick sidestep, beloved of boxers trapped against the ropes, Jason turns the tables, so that Merle finds herself pinned against the wall with Jason's face no more than three inches away breathing the words: 'If you want to know the truth, I was thinking of marriage.'

'Marriage!' (Again far too loud, bringing Donna's hands down with a jerk and making Freda shake her hair over her reddening face.)

. 'Yes . . . *marriage*.'

And up comes Merle's hand, palm open, to land hard and full on the side of Jason's jaw.

'Cheek! Rotten, filthy cheek.'

'Good God!'

'Just because I let you share my pad.'

'You don't know the background.'

'*Marriage!*'

Now although Merle keeps saying 'Marriage!' and the sudden ejaculation of this word is undoubtedly a shock, the idea is nowhere near as repugnant as she is now making out. Merle, or, as she is more usually called, Merle the Curl, is well known throughout the embryonic and fading Communes of London as a reliable and independently-minded

leader, and to succumb to marriage at twenty would do her image immeasurable harm. Thus, although the sight of Jason and the thought of the late Miss Bessie Trundel-Jones's fortune is attractive to the point of compulsion, Merle, a well-known advocate of the pernicious pamphlet, yet a hidden Pill taker, is aware that she must make a mammoth splash before being landed. What she does not know, of course, is that due to the peculiar provisos Jason has his pen poised ready to draw the red line.

'... Marriage!'

'Some people would give their right arm to be asked.'

'You conceited brat!'

With these venomous words, Merle turns her back and walks into the garden.

Buzz, buzz . . . Buzz, buzz.

'Darling!'

'Darling!'

'I'm on my way over.'

'Wonderful.'

'Just wanted to make absolutely sure you'd be there.'

'You'll have to be quick.'

'This holiday, darling . . . when is it?'

'Monday week.'

'Monday week! I can't possibly go.'

'Why ever not?'

'Stay where you are, I'll be right over.'

'Mr Sydney Lom? Jason Reeve here, I have a problem.'

Mr Sydney Lom's sepulchral laugh is allowed a little rope. 'I warned you.'

'Are you my judge?'

'Judge?'

'Are you the umpire . . . referee?'

Mr Lom hesitates: 'I'm your great-aunt's solicitor, if that's what you mean.'

Jason lowers his voice: 'Listen . . . who's to say . . . the purity, the milk and honey, all immaculate to the nuptial couch . . . you know.'

'You are placed on your honour as a Trundel-Jones . . . together, of course, with any observations the executors might wish to make.'

'And who are the executors?'

'Your Uncle George in the Falkland Islands and the Rev. Terence Stonor-Green.'

Jason drops his voice so much that even Donna, standing just outside the door, can hear nothing further: 'Listen, in a couple of hours a third girl will arrive here, and that will make four.'

'How can it?'

'There are already two girls and a woman.'

'My!'

'Now certainly the woman and one of the girls, or even two, are ineligible.'

'You know that for a fact?'

'Yes.'

'Then what's the problem? That only leaves one.'

'The others want an explanation.'

'You mean you haven't told them?'

'Of course not.'

'That seems very unfair to me, leading them up the garden.'

'They've been doing the leading, not me.'

Mr Sydney Lom is doubtful: 'Anyway, this is nothing to do with me directly. My advice is to simply tell them about the will.'

'They'll never believe me . . . it will have to be read to them by someone of integrity.'

A long difficult silence.

'It's a very long way . . . it will take me at least three hours.'

'I'll keep them talking.'

'Tonight!'

'It must be. I'm besieged.'

Mr Sydney Lom is about to find a good excuse when he too remembers the size of Great-Aunt Bessie's estate.

Donna, petulantly: 'How much longer do we have to sit here playing this stupid game?'

'Happy Families is not a stupid game.' (These are the only cards Jason can find.)

'Mister Bun the Baker!'

Jason turns to the others for support. Only Freda gives a slight smile. Jason knows that he is on his own: 'It's a highly moral game, very much recommended by all the Churches.'

Donna shows her teeth: 'Paaaah!'

'Besides, Caroline has only just arrived, it would be rude to stop now.'

But Caroline is quick to speak for herself: 'Christ! Don't mind me.'

Jason, with his head on one side, appeals to Freda: 'It came from Germany . . . brought over by the Prince Consort and was a great favourite with the Queen.'

Donna grinds her lower jaw: 'We've played it for *three hours!*'

'Two hours twenty-three minutes.' This of course is Jason with his eye on the clock.

'Diddums watching the time again.'

Merle, Freda and Donna looking at Caroline, eyes wide, then the buzz . . . buzz, buzz . . . buzz, buzz, and Jason running for the phone. The voice at the other end is slow and heavy. It is a police sergeant from Wiltshire with urgent news of Mr Sydney Lom. 'The gentleman won't be with you tonight, sir, as planned . . . he took the corner too fast at Gallows' End . . . nothing serious, just a fractured leg.'

The four women stare at Jason, and Jason stares at the

women: 'It's Uncle Felix . . . he wants me in London urgently, a business matter of the greatest importance.'

Caroline on the landing, intercepting Jason and making him drop his suitcase: '*Three of them!*'

'One an aunt, the other two old friends by way of business.'

'*Business!* Three grumble and grunts, you rotten twisting . . .'

'I'll be late.'

'All that rubbish about clank clank . . . warlocks and kids under walnut trees . . . no wonder you tried keeping me away.'

Jason makes a grab at the suitcase: 'Uncle Felix will be hopping mad . . .'

'And this holiday . . .'

'Monday week, the Seychelles . . . one of the smaller islands with a wonderful name . . . Aride.'

'I can't possibly . . . we're doing all the new nighties, and what about you? You're meant to be taking them.'

Jason circulates his arms: 'Someone will have to go.'

'Someone?'

'One of us.'

'*One of us! Why only one?*'

Jason retrieves the suitcase: 'I'll be late.'

'You rotten bastard, cutting out on me.'

'You heard yourself . . . Uncle Felix.'

'Illuminated extra-terrestrial piss balls!'

'Darling!'

'The big, big ditch.'

Jason starts to move: 'I can explain everything just as soon as I've seen my solicitor.'

Jason on the stairs; Caroline in full cry: 'I'm not moving till you get back.'

Jason through the front door without looking behind, then taking his first breath.

Fourteen

FREDA HAUSHOFER stands, uncertain, half in and half out of her dress, while her father marches and counter-marches.

‘It’s not been easy without your dear mother.’

‘No.’

‘Bringing up a girl on her own is difficult for any man . . . there are certain times and certain things . . .’

Herr Haushofer halts and stands at ease.

‘ . . . We should have talked more.’

Freda remains still—to move would be indecent in her present state of semi-dress. Herr Haushofer marches again. ‘ . . . There are times when duty calls. When we must put aside all personal thoughts and strive for the greater gain . . . *even go against all our closest held beliefs.*’

Over the top of her dress, Freda looks surprised.

‘When your friend becomes your enemy and your enemy your friend. The Führer knew this when we marched into Russia . . .’

Freda is worried.

‘ . . . We had to completely face about.’

‘Love your enemy?’

Herr Haushofer halts, then shifts from one foot to the other: ‘You could say that.’

‘Isn’t that what you mean?’

Herr Haushofer lays a plump red hand on his daughter’s slender arm: ‘Let me explain. Knowing men as I do, I’ve always made sure . . .’

Freda nods. With memories of Fagg’s Mead remarkably strong, and quite naturally assuming this is the battleground towards which her father is moving, she is forced to lift the

left side of her loose black bra and cover the blushes she knows are already working quickly across her face. She is about to say, 'It will never happen again . . . anyway, the young man is only interested in nature,' when her father continues: ' . . . Now everything is different.'

'Different!'

'Completely.'

'How is it different?'

'The situation has changed . . . defence must now give way to attack.'

'Father!'

Herr Haushofer points a finger.

'Outflank and encircle . . . get your objective in your sights and drive for it . . . *let nothing get in your way.*'

'You haven't told me . . .'

'It's plain, girl, plain. The boy, the English boy, Jason . . . your two arms the panzers . . . The Schlieffen Plan, driving for the coast . . . *the great left hook!*'

Freda's heart thumping and all those nuns shrivelling inside their winples: 'Jason!'

'Catch him.'

'I hardly know him.'

Herr Haushofer takes the small silver hip flask from his pocket and drains it.

'I'm sending you on a mission . . . but it should be easy. The boy likes you, anyone can see that . . . just play all your womanly wiles, eyes, voice, shoulders, hips . . . the lot, you should know.'

Freda remains uncertain. Herr Haushofer looks at his daughter for a long time. ' . . . I'll get Donna to help . . .'

'No!'

This cry from the heart brings Herr Haushofer to attention: 'All right then . . . but we leave in three days.'

Freda looks at the floor. Herr Haushofer closes and kisses his daughter surprisingly gently on the cheek: 'Remember it is for the honour of the Haushoferen.'

Herr Haushofer clicks his heels and gives a little bow. With his hand on the doorknob, he stops.

‘Has he any interests . . . golf . . . fishing . . . the opera?’

Freda sees one faint hope: ‘Only Pan and the Black Forest.’

Herr Haushofer is puzzled, yet nevertheless gives a smile of supreme confidence: ‘Then follow it up . . . follow it up.’

‘My dear Donna.’

Donna, her glass carefully poised, raises her head. Herr Haushofer purrs, for this wife of his British partner sitting here like this with her low-cut dress is certainly in the Albrecht Dürer class: ‘Freda is beginning to grow up.’

Donna chokes, her thoughts racing through the front door, via, of course, the landing and all over Fagg’s Mead.

‘Beginning!’

Herr Haushofer remains doubtful: ‘And it is only a beginning, she has lived a very sheltered life.’

Donna throws her hands up most expressively and bursts out laughing. Herr Haushofer drops down beside her on the chaise-longue and lays his hands gently on her lap.

‘Sometimes I wish I had made her see a little more of the world.’

The humour of the situation makes Donna forget her chagrin, and allows Herr Haushofer’s fingers to crawl several inches into no-man’s-land before she remembers the fat neck, thick nose and red ears, and scoops them away.

‘My dear Hans, your daughter is perfectly capable of looking after herself.’

Herr Haushofer is unconvinced: ‘You don’t know Freda, she even blushed when I talked about it.’

‘About what?’

Herr Haushofer shrugs: ‘The point is she needs help.’

Whatever may have happened in Fagg’s Mead could not possibly, in Donna’s view, have crowned what had already happened here in her own house on that fateful

night when Jason crossed the landing in a state of such high expectation: 'Help? It is I that need help.'

'We are all our neighbour's keeper.'

'Before he'd even reached her . . . before he'd even opened her door . . . on the landing, leading him like a banner . . . such a display!'

Herr Haushofer is puzzled: 'My dear Donna, what have I said?'

Donna stares at him blankly.

'What help?'

Herr Haushofer lowers his voice and brings his head so close that Donna's hair brushes his cheek.

'It is Felix's idea to link the two houses . . . bring the Trundel-Joneses and the Haushofers even closer together.'

'My God!'

Herr Haushofer is on his knees: 'Talk to Freda, help her over her inhibitions.'

Donna screams hysterically and goes white. Herr Haushofer is worried and suggests brandy, but Donna points to the French windows. Although her mouth is open and she is sucking hard, the sitting room is now totally without oxygen.

'Air.'

Herr Haushofer flings open the French windows, and not till she is well outside, walking in the space between the evergreens around the summer house and feeling the cold evening in the deepest channels of her lungs, does Donna permit herself the tears associated with the most abysmal moments of existence.

Fifteen

UNCLE FELIX sits in front of Sir Cello Tiffel, holding the merchant banker's letter.

My dear Felix,

I'm afraid the full two million loan is off. Naturally we are as disappointed as anyone, but with the Government keeping an eye on bank loans and, in your case, the Ministry of Defence and Chiefs of Staff putting down their veto, it is more than difficult. It's this idea of yours to manufacture nothing but the Pill that upsets them, and they're quoting National Security . . . and when a Government quotes National Security, there's not a lot anyone can do. They argue that if you shut Cobbler's Drove, what is the serviceman of the future to carry in his knapsack? It would be hard enough getting a mademoiselle to take your Pill, but with all the planning people saying that further European wars are unlikely, what chance has the average Tommy of persuading one of those fillies in the bazaar to start, even if he had the time? Of course, their other fear is VD . . .

Uncle Felix looks up. Sir Cello Tiffel is waning. The muscles, the skill of hand and foot, the fleetness of eye that combined to give him his Double Blue are on the decline. In fact the eyes, often misted now, sit in saucers that are red, blue or grey, depending on the season, time of day and proximity of the Napoleon. Today they are grey. But his voice is still strong: 'That's one thing the older methods took care of.'

'Mechanical means are as outdated as the dodo.'

'Not for the servant of the Crown, whether military or

civil, or for the representative of British Industry, *when they are away from home.*'

As Sir Cello quietly lets these last few words sink in, it is perfectly obvious to Uncle Felix, brooding over the unfairness of the situation, that this phrase has been lifted straight from a Whitehall minute: 'In which case Trundel International is being blackmailed. If in the national interest they want us to continue uneconomically, they must come out in the open and say so. They must also consider a subsidy. In fact they must put us on exactly the same footing as British Rail, the National Health Service and the Concorde.'

Sir Cello slowly shakes his head: 'The trouble is you've made yourself indispensable.'

'I shall get the matter raised in Parliament.'

Sir Cello's headshake accelerates.

'I'm told privately by the Whips that no one will bring it up. Politically, it's far too delicate. If it were known that Government were using taxpayers' money to subsidise a private-enterprise contraceptive manufacturer, the results would be disastrous. With the growing strength of the Catholics, half the seats in Liverpool would be lost.'

'Then we may have to consider shutting down completely.'

Sir Cello leans back till the supports of his chair creak.

'There used to be a Defence of the Realm Act. Parliaments are capable of doing funny things.'

Uncle Felix winces. Sir Cello waves towards his own letter: '. . . Of course we'd like to help. After all, that's our business . . . but with things as they are, we daren't cough up the lot. If you could find the majority, say sixty per cent, yourselves . . . ?'

Uncle Felix looks at the letter for a very long time. When he slowly nods, Sir Cello rises and shakes his hand. Jason has said nothing but 'Good morning'.

Sixteen

JASON NOISELESSLY shuts the car door, lets himself into the house, picks up the letter from the hall table and taking it to the sidelight, slips his finger into the flap of the pale brown envelope with the childlike upright script.

Dear Sir,

I have suddenly remembered. It was nothing to do with Germany; that was the powder we sold for quite another purpose. Pan, the Sylvan Method, was the trade name for something we marketed for a party in the Midlands. An old lady living in Hanley or Stoke, by the canal. She kept pigeons and a goose, and that's where it came from. She never let us know the recipe, saying it must go to the grave with her. When she died nine years ago, my wife went to the funeral.

*Yours faithfully,
Joseph E. Ferrara*

Jason sighs, screws up the letter, tiptoes up the stairs, and slips quietly into his room.

Freda is under pressure. With one of the three days gone in fruitless worry and the presence of Caroline and Merle reminding her of her own shortcomings and slim chances of success, she knows that if she is to fulfil her father's demands, and be truly filial and patriotic, her actions in the next few hours must be quite uncharacteristic of her own shy self. Her one conscious asset is acting. Eighteen

months at the Saxe-Coburg School of Religious Drama, during which time she played several supporting roles, from Pharaoh's daughter to the tender-branched fig tree in Matthew's parable, have given her an ability that, while it may not be appreciated in the more sophisticated centres, can bring concentrated and prolonged applause from the more loving and tolerant church audiences. There is one part Freda has secretly wanted to play since her first appearance on the boards, and one she has always drawn away from. It is, of course, Salome. Tonight, while Jason is away, this is the part she will practise. She will drift through her door and into his door, and there try out those important little pirouettes and *pas de deux* that later, on his return, will make the young Englishman completely forget not only Merle and Caroline, but the ever-watchful Donna as well. And the reason Freda decides to rehearse in Jason's room is a tribute to her Germanic thoroughness. It is so that on the first performance, the exact location of every item of furniture will be stamped on her memory and there can be no chance of her catching one or other of her scarves on the bed-rail, or her foot in an extra-large knot-hole.

The Freda that Jason sees floating in through his door, catching the soft moonlight on her pale coffee nightdress with the lace sleeves and loosely wound scarves, is a new Freda. A girl pushing down to her slippered feet everything that moulded her childhood, and whose one resolve is to be a dutiful daughter. It is also a beautiful Freda, and although Jason's first thoughts as he raises his head from his pillow are uncertain, for what has this Fräulein to offer now the Black Forest no longer holds a mystery? once he sees those smooth legs so perfectly displayed between the hem of the coffee nightdress and the dark red of the carpet, he has no doubts, and instantly sits upright with his arms held out and open. Freda is halfway through her first pavane when her eyes fall on the moonlit bed, and she would have collapsed on the floor had not Jason acted with the

same speed as by the molehill in Fagg's Mead. As it is, Freda gives a little whimper before going quite limp in the strong encircling arms.

'You fainted.'

'I must have been sleep-walking . . .'

Freda with her head on Jason's shoulder, is raying quietly to all the gods in Valhalla: ' . . . I do sometimes when I'm under great strain.'

Jason is extremely sympathetic, and tightens his arms.

'Strain?'

'Pressures.'

Jason nods, he too has great pressures.

'Try and forget them, I do.'

'It's not easy, not with my background.'

This surprises Jason, for although he realised at their very first meeting that this girl was unused to being trifled with, now, at the speed with which she is settling in his arms, he is having second thoughts. For one thing, her entry was certainly not sleep-walking, nor even sleep-dancing, for her sudden collapse on seeing him was too conscious an act to be associated with any form of sleep. Luckily he is completely unaware of the Saxe-Coburg School of Religious Drama.

'You mean you're having to fight hard to stay here?'

'In a way.'

Jason loosens his arms, but the girl makes no effort to move, although her heart-beats thump into the silent room. Jason is naturally puzzled but it is apparent that little more will be learned by talking.

'Ahhhhhhh . . . ' This long-drawn-out, softly breathed, meaningful, muted moan from Freda convinces Jason that it is certainly time we joined the Common Market and rid ourselves of all the barriers holding the two countries apart.

'Eeeeeaaaap, as smooth as mink.' This, of course, refers to the curve above the pudenda, the part normally covered

by the lower third of the coffee nightdress, or just beneath the elastic of the bikini.

'Ahhooooo.' This is the change in key when Jason's other hand encompasses Freda's breast and his fingers find the proud, free-standing Aztec-temple nipple.

'Even silkier . . . the Interflora of Paradise . . . didn't you know?'

'No' (very faint).

'All the horticulturists got together.'

'Why?'

'As a sort of offering.'

Although everything is going well, and her father, were he able to see her now, would indeed be proud, Freda is sufficiently a tactician to believe that she must reinforce success with one of the final arrows in her armoury: 'I suppose all this happened in the Black Forest?'

Jason is surprised and delighted at such co-operation, for if there is one thing he enjoys during lovemaking it is a good stimulating conversation of the right sort. Something at which Caroline, of course excels: 'I would have guessed mousy or blonde . . . but there, you never can tell with women.'

Freda, learning with every second, is quick to understand and blush.

'I thought you had an obsession . . . with Pan and charcoal-burners?'

Jason levers his right arm under the hollow of Freda's back and wraps himself close, his mouth wide over hers: 'Wrong track, I'm afraid. It's Hanley now or Stoke . . . you know, the Potteries . . . and a goose and pigeons.'

Freda is amazed at the flexibility of this young English mind, and but for his expert tactility would now be feeling alarmed.

'You make everything up.' (All Freda's statements are now almost inaudible whispers.)

'Everything is true . . . here's the way . . . the only way . . . the only decent honest way . . . the Appian Way (the

trouble is that he has said all this to Caroline) . . . the way of all flesh . . . the way ahead . . . leading like a grove . . .’

Freda shudders, an action which, much to her surprise, greatly increases her pleasure: ‘Groves are dark and full of druids.’

‘Lucky chaps, they’re here all right . . . up to their tricks . . . but wait, where does it lead? To the pool and the mistle-toe plantation.’

A second ago, if asked to testify whether further speech on her part was possible, Freda would have said ‘No’. Yet here she is, actually taking up the challenge: ‘Mistletoe!’

‘You’re full of it . . . acres and acres right where the Valkyrie ride.’

Then Jason implanting his downward progression of kisses, starting with the breasts and increasing Freda’s already dangerously high stress level with each descending step. Finally, in one ecstatic shower of sheets, blanket and coverlet, he uses the bed as a turn-table, and very much the-little-engine-that-might-and-probably-will, certainly the-little-engine-that-forgets-Mr-Lom’s-advice, he closes on the engine-shed doors, hoping very much that the moonlight is enough.

‘. . . There they go.’

‘Who?’ (This is so quiet it hardly spans the two feet seven inches.)

‘Glow-worms all around . . . in the trees, hanging from the branches, waving their lights, green lights . . . waving . . . puff, puff, puff.’

‘Oooooooooeeee.’

‘And the noises, the singing, a whole choir trapped in there, *Deutschland über Alles*, and the descant . . . everyone down the mine, entombed . . . where are Prince Willie’s Death’s Head Hussars? Stretcher-bearers to the front, and keep your head down, well down.’

Freda, unlike Merle, Caroline or Donna, has lived a very sheltered life, and although beneath the surface her desires often stir like shackled beasts, this is the first time they have

actually had the leg-irons off. Thus her anxieties, emotions and hopes are in a state of perilous equilibrium when Jason, his hands caressing what he took to be euphemistically called the Black Forest, goes that little bit further and is the first man to explore those delicate purple petals that frame the oyster. Freda's cry is quite involuntary, it is a cry of pure pleasure and surprise, but nevertheless it is loud enough to penetrate the wall where Caroline lies tossing in an uncomfortable sleep, hoping to make some impression on the hard hair mattress especially substituted for the normal Slumbermistress by a co-operative Marc, on Donna's instructions.

Caroline's reaction on entering the room is quick and instinctive. She picks that area of Freda's thigh where the moonlight falls brightest and where the curves are most pronounced and there sinks her teeth. Freda's second cry alerts the Marc, who at that moment is passing beneath the open window with a brace of pheasants plucked from the lowest branches of Lady Ivy Gore's coppice, and being the Marc he naturally stops and listens.

Caroline sits on the foot of Jason's bed.

'That settles it.'

'Yes.'

'Is that all you can say?'

'What else is there to say?'

'You don't care.'

'Of course I care.'

The moonlight frames Caroline's auburn hair like a halo.

'*Soixante-neuf with her!*'

'It wasn't.'

'I saw it.'

'Not properly . . . it may have looked like it at a glance.'

'I can tell *soixante-neuf* when I see it . . . *and with her!*'

'Don't keep saying *with her*.'

'If it wasn't *soixante-neuf*, what was it?'

'I'm not going into details . . . it was all perfectly innocent, and so is she. Anyway, I'm tired.'

'I should think you would be.'

Jason rolls over, deliberately displaying his back.

'... *soixante-neuf with a Hun!*'

Jason rolls back: 'Good God! Who's the anti-apartheid queen, who's the pin-up of the Race Relations Board?'

Caroline moves closer, her voice changes.

'Darling!'

'Uuuurgh.'

Caroline, softly, reproachfully: 'I told you I was staying, couldn't you wait?'

'If you want to know she was sleep-walking . . . she suffers.'

Caroline gives a loud mocking laugh. Jason pulls blanket and sheet over his head:

'What's the use?'

'And I'm not bloody well going to the Seychelles or anywhere else.'

'It's all booked.'

'I don't care.'

'Hot sun; silver beaches; warm gentle seas; starlit nights under the Southern Cross; exotic Creole rhythms; dark lithe bodies moving under the wafts of cinnamon and vanilla while overhead the giant coco-de-mer, famous the world over for their undoubted aphrodisiac properties, hang motionless awaiting the evening breeze.'

'Darling!'

Jason, wriggling: 'I'll send you your ticket.'

'Like hell you will . . . I'll meet you at the airport.'

Jason shaking his head: 'I have to be here . . . Besides, I couldn't afford two.'

Caroline's auburn hair falling across her face, giving the absolute Lady Macbeth look: 'You deceitful bastard . . . get the lays over and bolt.'

'That's untrue.'

'Who got in first . . . who got number one?'

'Not me.'

Caroline's face is very near : 'Till I met you, I was bloody well innocent.'

'Not in my lifetime.'

Caroline's hand on his throat, her eyes ablaze and Jason appealing hands towards the door : 'For God's sake ! I started to explain the other day . . .'

'It's this search for someone *without anything*, isn't it ?'

'In a way.'

'And is this how you go about it . . . *looking* ?'

'Don't be so stupid.'

'And when I think of my poor grandfather, blown to pieces and them finding nothing bigger than that . . .,' and she making a circle with finger and thumb, ' . . . his left bollock.'

'Poor sod, I'm dreadfully sorry.'

'And you doing your tricks with that Frankfurter ! I've a damn good mind to pour petrol over the lot and set fire to it.'

Caroline's teeth grinding, her hands making ominous motions, when a cry of 'Hey !' from below the window shatters the stillness of the night and sends Caroline head-long back to her room.

When Donna hears from an anxious but extremely talkative Marc that the ginger-haired police sergeant with the large bosom was in Mr Jason's room causing that poor man considerable discomfort by accusing him of acts of gross indecency with the young blonde German, acts that were they to be known abroad would certainly have every decent middle-class voter calling not only for the renewal of corporal punishment, but of capital punishment as well, Donna is driven to the far limits of sanity and endurance.

Although the Begherrehs are today a most civilised community, there are, as in folk anywhere, ancient stories handed down within families that lie festering in forgotten

corners of the mind and are only remembered under the stimulus of some traumatic incident. For Donna, this traumatic incident is the Mare's early-morning report. Even before dressing, therefore, Donna heads for the little leather-bound book where her grandmother's writing spells out in the old Arabic the better-known well-established aphrodisiacs that, were they in translated form to reach the eyes of Uncle Felix, would make him commit self-flagellation with his Adam's apple. (On the other hand, were Herr Haushofer to see them he would merely place his pudgy hand even more firmly on Donna's lap and send those digital platoons over the top at the double.) However this morning Donna is only interested in the effect upon Jason. Bearing in mind that certain of the more promising recipes, viz., fat from the hump of a she-camel, boiled ass's member with cloves, would not be readily available even were she to get the Mare to drive her all round Soho or shop through every floor at Harrods, Donna ends up by choosing a simple ground mixture of available vegetables, herbs, fungi and spices which she spreads on several pieces of rye bread and proffers to a surprised Jason with his morning coffee. Although bronzed and healthy, with fine, strong teeth and bones, vigorous hair, a leaping stride and broad shoulders, Jason has his Achilles heel. Inherited from his paternal grandfather, and therefore unknown to the Trundel-Joneses, is an allergy that when stimulated results in swellings of gargantuan proportions at the extremities of the body. The pretty, delicate white fungus, aptly named for this occasion *Clitopilus Prunulus*, and gathered by Donna personally from the shady side of Fagg's Field, is normally perfectly safe, and delicious when eaten with white sauce. That is, of course, for the average person. But even when compounded with many other ingredients and spread on rye bread it still retains sufficient of its old untreated properties to trouble someone whose system has such a low sensitivity threshold as Jason's. The normal delay between eating and activation is as short as four hours, and it is just

before lunch that Jason excuses himself and takes to his bed, there to rest and nurse the ever-growing pain in his loins. Donna, on the other hand, when she sees this young man's hurried departure, quite naturally but erroneously concludes that he is in the same frame of mind as on the landing during that never-to-be-forgotten night she now privately refers to as 'The Night of the Great Front'. Giving him five minutes' start, therefore, and completely forgetting her luncheon guests, Caroline and Freda glaring at one another across the table, Donna hastens up the fine broad staircase of Lower Brandy Manor, certain that at last she is to overcome and obtain her fair share of all the blessings her nephew-in-law has been so abundantly distributing to everyone else.

Jason lies V-like on the bed, hands tightly clasped over the steadily growing tender parts, moaning softly to himself and writhing gently on the dark blue coverlet. Donna, amazed and delighted at the effectiveness of her recipe, rapidly closes, and actually has one hand over Jason's head and the other on the top of the sheet when Jason with a supreme effort points towards the great walnut wardrobe and whispers, 'Tablets.' Donna, surprised yet intrigued, believing that this young man too has concoctions no less powerful than her grandmother's that he wishes to add to the flames, is only too pleased to rush to the large ornate doors and swing them open. Jason's tablets, large, orange and torpedo-shaped, lie ready in a small medicine bottle for this very emergency. But it is not the bottle that Donna sees nestling within clean socks and a red cummerbund, but Mr Jo Ferrara's half-open shoe-box. And, of course, it is Mr Jo Ferrara's shoe-box that Donna opens, peeling away the tissue paper and bay leaves. Her visual powers are so acute that even before the bay leaves are fully cleared she knows exactly what is below and only pauses to marvel at the fine engraving and delicate filigree before the tidal wave of horror is upon her. Her carefully prepared mixture

with the *Clitopilus Prunulus* has been called upon to perform the impossible : stimulate a vacuum. Donna's cry upon this discovery is long and high, and as well as bringing the Mare to a halt in the yard, makes Jason twist violently upon his bed.

'Deceiver !'

Donna brandishes the box, takes out the jewe' of the long-dead discerning sapphic Countess and waves it above her head like a mace : 'Pretending you had something fine and noble . . . something outstanding . . . *when all the time it was false!*'

Jason, able only to groan, covers his face in the pillow.

Donna, sweeping into the dining room, her eyes ablaze, her teeth tightly clenched, her hands shaking, addressing two unwelcome, puzzled guests : 'The great fraud . . . the complete English fake,' and her hands doing those expressive sweeps just over the candlesticks, ' . . . he is an impostor . . . a deceiver . . . a man of detachable appendages . . . *there is nothing there!*' And the emotional flourish with both palms open suggesting the total absence of Jason's genitals and the subsequent débâcle in her mind. At first, both Caroline and Freda find it hard to understand Donna's strong inference. Caroline knows from experience that until recently there undoubtedly was something there, and can only conclude that Jason has met with an accident for which Freda is to blame and which now accounts for much of Jason's strange behaviour. Freda is far less certain, ' it even she feels that there was something there when, after the sleep-walking, she lay in Jason's arms before the moonlight pouring through the window sent that young man exploring. Neither of them speak, however, although both shake their heads in sad expressive gestures, and after a few moments of thoughtful silence, Donna finds that she has so imbibed the British sangfroid that she is able to proceed with the distribution of the lamb daube as if the discovery of an artificial phallus, carved and embossed with a falcon

argent and belt or, under her own roof in the middle of the English countryside, were an everyday occurrence.

Merle has been playing the Trappist. After a day and night spent in private vigil upon the steps of the National Gallery she now feels in a position to phone Lower Brandy seven two and open negotiations on the whole question of marriage put to her earlier by Jason. Jason takes the call, filled with anti-histamine, wrapped in his dressing gown and still in considerable discomfort from knowing that within the house his name has absolutely no standing.

‘What proposition?’

‘The other day . . . marriage.’

‘Ah!’

‘I must say you don’t sound overenthusiastic.’

Jason has memories of the face-slapping.

‘Nor were you.’

‘I’ve been in retreat and thought it all out. Provided you agree to certain conditions, I accept.’

Jason pulls the dressing gown closer.

‘One of them is that I keep my surname.’

‘There may be . . . difficulties.’

‘We must discuss the whole thing rationally . . . as equals.’

‘Then there’s the pernicious pamphlet.’

‘That’s what the retreat was all about. I’m now quite sure that with a little give and take on both sides, everything can be worked out.’

Jason remembers the Pill Card and Tuesday’s on the tip of her tongue: ‘There are still the solicitors and executors . . . you may not pass.’

‘Pass!’

‘Great-Aunt Bessie was very strict.’

The slightest pause and uncertainty from Merle, then very quietly and in another voice: ‘I’ve been thinking about something else . . . love.’

Jason swallows.

'I thought you said love was the response of a beaten cur . . . remember?'

Merle is moving uncomfortably in the phone-box, biting her lips and drawing strange erotic designs on the dirty glass with her spare hand.

'It's very difficult to talk about it from here.'

'And this matter of the Pill.'

'Come down . . . tonight.'

Jason explains, in vague terms, his ailment : 'Besides, as I said before, there's no point . . . you wouldn't pass.'

Merle takes no notice, but, becoming as crisp and precise as she was in the Liverpool Street Commune, within seconds she proposes Bradhurst Cross as neutral ground and a suitable time.

Seventeen

CAROLINE IS amazed how easy it is to speak to Donna : 'Are you certain?'

Donna nods : 'I've never been more certain of anything in my life. Nor did he bother to deny it.'

Caroline's mind is working fast : 'You actually saw this . . . instrument?'

'Of course, and handled it.' After all her studies Donna is proud of her knowledge of antiques. 'I can recognise the genuine article when I see it. And no one spends money like that *for nothing!*'

Any doubts Caroline might have had are dispelled. She is only thankful to have learned the truth from someone else and not have to find it out for herself. With her high blood pressure, the shock would have killed her.

Jason is sitting up in bed, well on the mend and toying with the idea of dressing, when Caroline knocks politely and enters with a large bouquet of zinnias freshly picked from the flower-bed near the stables. She places the blooms on the coverlet, then stands near the window, throwing occasional sidelong glances at the large walnut wardrobe wherein lies the famous instrument which, at a later date, when she has grown accustomed to the bereavement, she would very much like to view.

'You'll want to be on your own for a while.'

Jason, surprised and pleased that Caroline is at last showing a little humanity and understanding, is quick to answer : 'That's very kind of you.'

'With your . . . troubles.'

Hurrah for Mr Sydney Lom. Crutches and all, he has

dragged himself to the phone to tell them. How honest, noble and self-sacrificing in the interests of their clients is the legal profession. Jason retracts all his earlier thoughts: 'Now you understand?'

'Of course.'

After all the difficulties, it is so easy.

'Naturally I'm sorry about it.'

'So am I . . . after all, we were old friends . . . and when you get to know something that well.'

Jason is only slightly puzzled: 'That's why we couldn't continue.'

There are tears in Caroline's eyes as she looks at the carpet: 'Of course not. It wouldn't be the same . . . not with anything . . . else.'

'It's not my choosing . . . I could have gone on and on . . . but there, none of us are masters of our own fate . . . we never know the power of external forces till it's too late.'

Caroline moves towards the door: 'It must be awful for you . . . better to be born blind than to enter a beautiful garden in the sunlight and then lose your sight.'

'What a lovely way of putting it.'

'Having something plucked away. I suppose there's no hope?'

Jason shakes his head: 'You know the implications.'

Caroline nods: 'This holiday.'

Jason points towards his jacket lying on the chair: 'The ticket's in the inside breast pocket.'

Caroline moves uncertainly: 'You do understand?'

'My God! Yes. If I were in your shoes I'd do exactly the same.'

'Only now you can't . . . any longer . . . it's not the same . . . in fact it could be quite distressing.'

Caroline eases out the long thin envelope: '. . . but I'll miss you.'

Caroline gently kisses his forehead. Jason aims lower, for the breasts, but Caroline pulls away. Jason suddenly feels very maudlin: 'And I hope you meet someone, someone

really nice . . . you deserve him. But don't forget there's a minimum size and diameter.'

'Darling! You say such delicious things.'

Within four minutes of her leaving the room, her minivan roars through the gate.

When Freda, in sad, halting, embarrassed tones, reports to her father on Donna's discovery and Jason's disability, Herr Haushofer marches and counter-marches at Light Infantry pace. Firstly he is worried by his own lack of judgement, for only this morning he would have bet any number of marks that the young Englishman was in the finest condition and full of fettle, and, secondly, having received no fresh orders from above, he has none to pass on to his daughter. He therefore suggests that for the present the girl marks time.

Eighteen

JASON'S SECOND visit to Bradhurst Cross within the month is very different from his first. Then he had travelled in the luxury of Uncle Felix's Rolls, behind the peaked cap of the Mare. Then, too, he was constantly on the move, hounded by the persistence of the auburn-haired Caroline, unsure which way to turn. Now Caroline has very sportingly withdrawn from the contest, leaving a very narrow field. Then, too, the Rev. Stonor-Green had seemed a distant figure, with little to offer but spiritual solace, and what good is spiritual solace in such circumstances? Today, however, as Jason catches the cleric half an hour before even-song, that long-nosed gentleman appears more a guardian angel. As executor of the will he offers good secular advice: 'I thought you would be back soon.'

Jason explains, outlining in nice clean words that his field is now down to two, one of which, Merle Peacock, the Rev. Stonor-Green must know. When the Rev. Stonor-Green proffers his opinion that Merle is 'one of the nicest of the modern girls', Jason asks the burning question outright. Was it Merle Peacock that his great-aunt had in mind when drawing up her will? The Rev. Stonor-Green is certain it was. Jason is sad and puzzled. In honesty he must mention the Pill-taking, but the vaginal orgasm myth and its implications are quite a different matter. Not within the compass of the will, yet to Jason of the utmost importance, he can only start with this subject in the hope that the Church has something to offer on the whole questionable matter raised by the pamphlet: 'to penetrate or not to penetrate'.

'As an Anglican, you must hold certain definite views

about the physical side of marriage . . . particularly about consummation.'

'That is an important part of it.'

'Full and complete consummation?'

The Rev. Stonor-Green shifts in his rocking chair: 'There can be only one consummation.'

Jason tries a slightly different approach.

'You presumably consider intercourse as a form of sacrament . . . like christening?'

The Rev. Stonor-Green is quick: 'Only within marriage.'

'And this intercourse is whole . . . and traditional. Exactly the sort of thing the Old Israelites might have expected on their goatskin rugs, a complete union.'

'With, of course, love.'

Jason nods. At the moment, however, he intends keeping to the more mechanical aspect, although he is determined to be delicate: 'But *it* must be enfolded?' (This with a fine expression of the hands.)

The Rev. Stonor-Green is puzzled.

' . . . The organ must be completely shrouded . . . like a full baptism, absolutely immersed . . . *right in up to the hilt!*'

The Rev. Stonor-Green nearly over-rocks: 'It is not for the Church to say *how far!*'

'But it's their duty to give guidance . . . presumably you have a minimum figure . . . you would expect it to be sixty or seventy per cent covered?'

The Rev. Stonor-Green tightens his grasp on the New Testament.

'That is for the individual to decide.'

Jason is disappointed. Again this is an example of the Church sitting on the fence, for there must be a point at which entry becomes consummation and quite obviously in the modern technological age it is best expressed as a percentage of the whole: 'And did Great-Aunt Bessie hold the same views?'

'Exactly.'

'And she still had Merle Peacock in mind?'

‘Undoubtedly.’

Jason does not consider it worth mentioning the Pill-taking; the whole matter is too confusing. Instead, he makes his farewells and crosses the road to the Bell, the natural ground upon which he is to meet Merle.

The Bell has a telephone message scrawled on the back of the sandwich list :

Jason. Terrific news; complete change of plan. Driving straight to Lower Brandy, meet me there. Love, Merle.

After seeing the gloom on his own face in the morning, Uncle Felix would never have believed that by late the same afternoon he could be so near to ecstasy. At half past eight he had stood in front of the bedroom mirror and decided that the features opposite were doomed to continue leading an antiquated business, unable to modernise or expand for the niggardliness of Government and timidity of the merchant bankers. At half past four there is this unknown girl in the shiny black dress running into Lower Brandy Manor as if every corner were known to her intimately, waving and shouting that the cleaned portrait of the Old Inventor, Gutta Percha himself, Corporal of the Horse Roger Trundel, is a Rembrandt. And there is Uncle Felix running into his study, scanning all those carefully hoarded financial cuttings to see that Rembrandt is slightly ahead of a man called Fragonard and doing very nicely near the top of the Indices.

Uncle Felix, his face scarlet, sweat covering his forehead, clasps Merle's hand : ‘Where is it . . . where is it?’

‘You didn't think I'd bring it with me . . . a *real Rembrandt*!’

Uncle Felix back to the charts, trying to remember the exact size, for this could make all the difference between £300,000 and £750,000 :

‘The dimensions . . . for God's sake girl, the dimensions?’

Merle makes motions with her hands, then waves frantically towards the phone : 'Ring Christie's!'

Uncle Felix shouting at the operator, calling her an imbecile, then the quiet voice of Christie's confirming that the Inventor is a genuine Rembrandt painted in the Master's latter years. For value, they suggest anywhere between £600,000 and £1,000,000, and propose an auction in the spring of next year. Uncle Felix pours two large glasses of brandy, then collapses in his chair. With a shaking hand and a trembling voice, and with his eyes glazed with tears, he looks Merle straight in the face : '*He was a mercenary . . . working for the Dutch.*'

'But Rembrandt painted him.'

Uncle Felix considers, the tears stop, the eyes brighten : 'And we shall have our new building . . . and plant.'

Merle only waits for the full smile to return before explaining in detail the exact concepts upon which her forthcoming marriage to Uncle Felix's nephew is to be based.

Luckily Herr Haushofer is sufficiently used to taking orders to listen to Uncle Felix without flinching and then to act without rancour. He simply puts his arm round his daughter's shoulders, reminds her of duty and reinforces it with tales of people trekking miles in the snow without asking why, and of the English charging down a valley full of guns. In this case, for the sake of the business, Uncle Felix has had to make a complete change of plan. However, in view of the disability they now know to be the lot of the young Englishman, this strategical switch may be an excellent thing. Yet so sentimental is Freda, that even knowing all that she does about Jason, and how empty life would be with him, she cannot hold back a tiny tear. The memory of the moonlight pouring in through the bedroom window and all that delicious exploring till the stupid moment she called out and awoke the auburn-haired hornet next door remains with her for a very long time.

Nineteen

JASON is thinking of getting a bigger, warmer, altogether more comfortable flat, not one designed for a very up-and-down fashion photographer, but one more suited to his new position of large stockholder and finance house. For it is Jason that owns the Rembrandt, and he will be the one to lend to Trundel International, at a good rate of interest, the money the Inventor fetches at auction. But for the moment this smaller flat is doing surprisingly well, for against the wall, beneath the window on the long wide couch acquired from the Portobello Road and re-covered with thick magenta brocade, rests Merle, in a very friendly, languid state. But exciting though this scene is, Jason is not without grave worries, for although Merle appears to take everything for granted—even talking about bottom drawers and orange blossom—and Uncle Felix acts as if Jason's future is settled, Jason himself knows that nothing has yet been resolved, only temporarily brushed under the carpet. So even now while they lie close, so close he can hardly focus upon the fine-pored skin, Jason is not fully at ease. The pamphlet and the Pill-taking still hang over him; dark brooding clouds: 'It still doesn't make sense.'

Merle's responses suggest that the least important thing in life is that things should make sense. During Jason's earlier pad-share with Merle, their physical contact was constrained, but now, even though Jason is confused, his mind still bounding with contradictions, he takes the first tentative steps to redress the intrusions of the London Fire Brigade. It is then he makes a startling and shocking discovery, something that makes him doubt the sensitivity of his own fingers: 'You're a virgin!'

'What do you expect?'

'Is that all you can say?'

'What do you want me to say?'

'*You're a virgin . . . after all that Pill-taking!*'

In answer Merle is even closer, thrusting out her breasts.

'Every day, with Tuesday's actually on your tongue . . .

I saw it!'

'Shut up and forget about it.'

Jason, pushing her away: 'Good God! How can I forget about it? You can't act like this.'

'Can't you see? Can't you take things as they are?'

Jason is sitting upright: 'What a thing to ask. You don't understand. *I must know where I am. Everything's so indefinite, it's driving me bloody well mad!*'

Merle's deep brown eyes are half closed, her head is down, her voice is quiet: 'If you must know, it was necessary. . . . I couldn't lead the Commune without it. It was part of my image.'

Jason has suffered many shocks, from the discovery that the retired missionary's sodomistic tendencies were only just controllable, to the uncovering of the two naked lesbians in the boot of his car. But this is undoubtedly one of his greatest shocks and makes him throw his hands in the air and cry: 'Christ! What a woman!'

'I thought you were bound to guess.'

Jason shakes his head: 'And what about the pamphlet, was that also part of your image?'

Merle hesitates for a long time: 'It was a sort of safeguard . . . all the men wanted to have it off, but none were really sure. Once a man had taken me over, he would have taken the Commune over too. It was the only way out.'

Jason is speechless.

'You can see it was a case of having to do it . . . nevertheless, I still stick by my principles . . . absolute equality, absolute freedom.'

Jason clasps her by the shoulders: 'To enter, or not to enter?'

Merle bites her lip; her voice is halting.

'That's not quite so important.'

'Yeeceep!'

And Merle is back upon him, her mouth wet, her body writhing, her breasts thrust out again, giving her the appearance of a late twentieth-century animated figurehead. For Jason, this image is seen first through a grey void of astonishment, and then through the first pale flickers of simmering pastures, thick and verdant . . . through quiet summer clouds upon which he now knows he may rest his head . . . through brimming golden buttercups and gossamer webs etched in dew. The jigsaw is perfect; his Great-Aunt Bessie was a genius of Newtonian proportions: 'It all fits . . . everything fits.'

'Everything.'

So excited is Jason that with his free hand he instantly dials Freeman, Lom and O'Donahue. Once through to Mr Sydney Lom he wastes no time, even forgetting to ask how the leg is: 'The milk and honey . . . we're there . . . yeeceep . . . yeeep . . . yeeep . . . and all approved by the executor.'

Mr Lom offers his sincere congratulations. 'Just one thing. Must we wait for the actual ceremony?'

Mr Lom is instantly serious: 'Certainly. As a man of the world, I would advise you to get married as soon as possible.'

Jason sadly replaces the phone.

'We've still got to get married first.'

Merle looks at herself and then at Jason. She half ties her hair, then changes her mind and returns to the writhing and figurehead work.

'There must be something we can do, something within your great-aunt's law. Nothing is completely watertight, there's always a loophole, if you look for it.'

Jason's reaction to this challenge is immediate.

Maiden Castle, alternate ditches and ramparts . . . cyclobranchiate. Vespasian sent the Second Legion up the shallow

side, Jason chooses the steepest. Scale the outer labia . . . hurrah for the majora (like a pinned butterfly). Keep close to the leader and into the hollows. Take a deep breath and over the inners or minors . . . another hurrah and into the purple . . . into the softness . . . into the warmth . . . the moist eye asymmetrical and the tiny snub tickling . . . silver hair curling past, waltzing . . . no moonlight this time. Sliding down the last labile bank and into the shadows . . . into the ocean . . . into the live sea, into the dead sea, into the sea froth, past the sea dragon to the heart of the coral . . . to the brine itself. Then the cry, as soft flesh, rigid muscles, squeezing bone and heaving thighs, drive his cheeks into his own hard teeth.

Jason is sad: 'It's going to be difficult, very, very difficult. Almost unbearable!'

'Yes.'

'It means either an enormous family . . . or?'

Jason and Merle both shudder at the thought of the alternatives. Merle spreads her fine legs, the toes pointing downwards, and rolls close. Not a foot from her face is the priapic maypole: 'It's a rotten shame.'

'Of course it's a rotten shame.'

'Can't you dispute the will on humane grounds?'

Jason shakes his head: 'Not a chance . . . we'll just have to suffer . . . unless, of course, we get rid of the money?'

Although this is a question, Merle does not answer it. Instead, she continues to stare at the slowly dwindling object in front of her.

'I think the whole thing's bloody diabolical.'

Jason sits in his shirt with the badly wrapped brown paper parcel, redirected from Lower Brandy, on his lap. Inside is a flat tin that might have contained small cigars or large sardines and around this is a letter written on lined paper:

Dear Sir,

In cleaning out, my wife found this, the last tin. The old lady used to prescribe the amount that would cover a small fingernail spread on a sweet biscuit and taken by both parties every Saturday. We always reckoned that with normal use a tin like this would last two years.

*Yours faithfully,
Joseph E. Ferrara*

Jason on his feet, leaping up and down, waving the tin before a puzzled Merle, shouting over and over again : 'Pan, the Sylvan Method . . . we're all right . . . we're saved.' Then throwing in grateful bouquets to Mr Joseph Ferrara, the Old Woman of the Potteries and even the Mare, so great is his excitement.

Twenty

THE REV. TERENCE STONOR-GREEN marries Merle and Jason on the 15th of September in the presence of a delighted Uncle Felix, an interested Mr Sydney Lom, a cheerful Herr Haushofer, a sad Freda, a puzzled Donna, a thankful Caroline and many others. On the 10th of June the following year, in spite of several packets of sweet biscuits and many thumbnails of Pan, the Sylvan Method (which tasted remarkably like stale pâté de foie gras), Roger Peacock Trundel Reeve, weighing eight pounds seven ounces, with fine silver hair and the noble brow of his mother, enters this world. He is just in time to attend, from the back of the Park Ward bodywork of the Rolls, the official opening of the new chemical plant annexed to the older huts of Trundel International at Cobbler's Drove. Only Donna's incomprehensible behaviour, when, instead of cutting the red ribbon at the door of the norethisterone acetate mixing room, she looks pensively at the silver scissors before lunging violently towards that part of Jason that until recently she had thought to be defective, spoils what is otherwise a perfect family afternoon.

In spite of Donna's action, Caroline Trundel Reeve is born the following April, just eleven months before her sister Freda.